

A Hundred Years of the Project Method in Poland

Abstract

The text presents the development of the project method in Polish education throughout the last century. The project method was introduced in Poland after regaining independence, and (1918-1939) it was implemented during the inter-war period in some schools both in urban and rural environments. Nevertheless, the method was at that time treated as a pedagogical novelty and experiment rather than a natural part of school life. After 1945, education, as other aspects of socio-political life, was influenced by the communist propaganda, and the project method supporting autonomy, democracy and empowerment was not promoted as a valuable educational approach. After 1989, when progressive trends appeared in Polish schools, the project method gained some popularity but it was not before 2008 when it was granted national and formal recognition. Then, the new core curriculum was developed and the project method became an obligatory part of the school reality. The revival of the project method was connected with the alarming findings concerning social capital in Poland. In this situation, making students cooperate within projects seemed a remedy for the decreasing social capital. As the author points out, formal introduction of the method does not necessarily mean its effective accomplishment which should be accompanied with spontaneity and authentic engagement. What is more, as the author shows, after decades of absence of this method in Poland and the lack of socio-cultural background, teachers might find it difficult to implement a project so as to contribute to the increase of social capital. All these areas need further investigation. Nevertheless, the author hopes that the text will contribute to better understanding of contemporary challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of the idea of projects in Polish education.

Keywords: New Education Movement, Project Method, History of Education

Introduction

The project method forms today part of the range of teaching methods that are widely known to students and teachers and commonly used at various levels of school education. The matter of interpretation of the very concept of “project method” and practical ways to

implement it are certainly an interesting area of pedagogical research, but the purpose of this paper is to analyse the development of the popularity of this method over the century. During this development, the periods of keen interest in the innovative way of working were interwoven with decades of oblivion, followed by a time when the discussed method was appreciated again by the educational community. This text has been based on an analysis of pre-World War 2 and contemporary pedagogical journals and publications tackling the subject of this study. I hope that such a retrospective look can contribute to a better understanding of our contemporary challenges, problems and opportunities related to the implementation of projects in the Polish education system.

The Project Method in Poland in 1918-1939

As Mirosław Szymański put it, the foundations of the method reached Poland mainly through *The Project Method*¹ by John Alford Stevenson translated into Polish 10 years after it had been published in the United States. In the pre-war pedagogical journals, there is a discussion of this method (referred therein in Polish to as *metoda zamierzeń* which may be translated as “the undertaking method”) with reference to that publication, although the publication itself was rather epigonous.² One of the first papers published in Poland concerning the project method dates back to 1925 and was published in the journal ‘Praca Szkolna’ and was based on the J.A. Stevenson’s book.³ Also based on the text of this American author, the journal ‘Ruch Pedagogiczny’ described in 1927 the project method by pointing to its features such as the linking of logical thinking with action referring to real life, role of teacher differing from the traditional role, and the stimulating course of classes.⁴ Because before the war the work by J.A. Stevenson was the only book translated into Polish on the method discussed, it was widely used as a reference.⁵ Zofia Bastgenówna was an author who in her work referred to a broader perspective, using also texts by John Dewey and William Kilpatrick. By analysing the principles of the project method, the author pointed out such advantages as bolstering child’s self-confidence and interests, forming their self-reliance and work skills. However, according to Z. Bastgenówna, the project method was burdened with excessive utilitarianism and characterised superficiality of educational activities. In addition, the author shared the view that the method was “a good but transitional form of upbringing, facilitating the absorp-

¹ STEVENSON, J.A., *Metoda projektów w nauczaniu*, Lwów-Warszawa 1930.

² SZYMAŃSKI, M., *O metodzie projektów. Z historii, teorii i praktyki pewnej metody kształcenia*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 44-46.

³ BEREŻNICKI, F., *Hasła „Nowej szkoły” w dydaktyce drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Toruń 1998, p. 129.

⁴ H.K. (a), *Metoda „projektów”*, „Ruch pedagogiczny” R. XIV, 1927, No. 5, pp. 147-151; H.K. (b), *Metoda „projektów”*, „Ruch pedagogiczny”, R. XIV, 1927, no. 4, pp. 118-121.

⁵ ROWID, H., *Szkola twórcza*, Kraków 1931, pp. 325-340; DZIERZBICKA, W., DOBROWOLSKI, S., *Eksperymenty pedagogiczne w Polsce w latach 1900-1939*, Wrocław 1963, p. 303; BEREŻNICKI, *op. cit.*, pp.130-135; SZYMAŃSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

tion of new ideas, fresh energy and new endeavours taken once and again, but also suffering from sudden increases and abrupt deviations from a defined scope of learning.”⁶

In practical terms, the project method used by few educators in Poland seemed attractive due to its psychological aspect (taking into account the mental development of children) and social aspect (usefulness of work products, teaching so as to make the students able for collective work, cooperation and co-responsibility). Also, the flexibility of the method, i.e. the possibility to apply it in various age groups and school conditions, was invoked. At the same time, as noted by W. Dzierzbicka and S. Dobrowolski, Polish educationists sought that “the use of the project method not be a passive imitation of American concepts, but a creative solution of the problem considered important (...).”⁷ Pre-war schools in which the method was used in a conscious and planned way included such schools as Szkoła Ćwiczeń przy Państwowym Seminarium Żeńskim im. E. Orzeszkowej (Teacher Training School at the E. Orzeszkowa State Women’s Seminary) in Warsaw (1926-1939), Szkoła Powszechna (Elementary School) in Mosina (1932-1936) and Szkoła Powszechna (Elementary School) in Hołoby near Kowel (1928-1939).⁸ The latter of the mentioned institutions is an example of a comprehensive, long-term implementation of the project method, which not only transformed the school, but also influenced the local community. The management staff of the school in Hołoby, accompanied by its team of educators, students, and with time also parents, conducted systematic work related, on the one hand, to the cleaning up and arranging the area around the school building and the school garden, and on the other to the independent production of teaching aids for the students. Any work performed was specific to a particular school subject, e.g. gardening formed a foundation for teaching biology and mathematics, the cleaning up and arranging of the area around the school building was associated with common planning, costing, selection of materials, writing letters with requests for assistance in the endeavour, and then reflected in works written by the students and in appropriately selected literary reference texts. Importantly, the efforts taken by the school began to influence the local community by activating parents and influencing their pro-social attitudes.⁹ The school that is usually mentioned as an institution where the project method was employed for the longest period (1926-1939) in Poland is Szkoła Ćwiczeń przy Państwowym Seminarium Żeńskim im. E. Orzeszkowej in Warsaw. When planning the work activities they were deriving ideas from J.A. Stevenson, even before his book was translated into Polish. The project method became a form of working mainly in the earliest grades (1st and 2nd), then continued as an additional method until the 6th grade. The first projects called “undertakings” carried out with the youngest children, concerned arithmetic combined with gardening, drawing and manual work, and as a result, “in a completely natural way, the subject teaching in these grades was replaced by

⁶ BASTGENÓWNA, Z., *Metoda projektów*, „Ruch pedagogiczny” R. XVII, 1930, no. 6, pp. 268-274.

⁷ DZIERZBICKA, W., DOBROWOLSKI, S., *op. cit.* p. 306.

⁸ SZYMAŃSKI, M., *op. cit.*, 47.

⁹ DZIERZBICKA, W., DOBROWOLSKI, S., *op. cit.* p. 313-314.

the teaching originating from the closest environment of the children and their experience in this environment, taking into the fullest consideration their own activity.”¹⁰ Apart from the mentioned schools, elements of the project method were also implemented in several other institutions (Turkowicze, Mosina, Warsaw, Vilnius), taking the form of one-off events rather than a planned and systematic activity. There was no school in which this method were the only method of work, even in the case of the Warsaw school discussed. The analysis of the implementation of projects in the schools in Warsaw and Hołoby shows that in the latter the projects were supposed to be of a utilitarian nature, which was based on the basic premise to positively transform the environment by working at school. As far as the Warsaw school is concerned, the aim was the comprehensive development of child’s personality, without school coercion but by “the organization of school work and personality of the teacher as a companion and adviser.”¹¹

Post-war period

Although Polish education after 1945 was undergoing comprehensive transformation, these changes were not aimed at educating in the spirit of active, participatory democracy, autonomy or co-operation, which are the core of the project method. The concept of raising a “new man” which was officially promoted at that time meant an educational ideal based on obedience and dependence, with the commitment allowed only within a strictly defined framework set by the communist ideology. Although this method has been given a prominent place in the history of pedagogical thought, emphasizing the qualities due to which the method deserves this (emphasis on the child’s activity and bringing school closer to life), it also was being portrayed as a relic of the past, an idea coming from the United States of the 1920s and 30s, well known before the war in Poland, but incompatible with “the psyche of the Polish society of that era”, which ultimately were not adopted in educational practice.¹² On the other hand, Józef Pieter pointed out that “active school methods hitherto promoted, in particular the Dalton method, project method, etc. had proved to be quite impractical and expensive.”¹³ The project method was little mentioned in popular textbooks for pedagogical university students,¹⁴ and the authors of these books were

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 321.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 331-332.

¹² MOLAK, A., *Metoda projektów*, in: *Szkoły eksperymentalne w świecie 1900-1975*, Ed. W. OKOŃ, Warszawa 1977, p. 56- 70.

¹³ PIETER, J., *Johna Dewey’a myśli przewodnie o wychowaniu*, „Chowanna” R. XIII, 1958, no. 5/6, p. 273.

¹⁴ WOŁOSZYN, S., *Dzieje wychowania i myśli pedagogicznej w zarysie*, Warszawa 1964, p. 419; SOŚNICKI, K., *Dydaktyka ogólna*, Wrocław 1959, p. 206-208, NAWROCZYŃSKI, B., *Dzieła wybrane. Zasady nauczania*, Volume 2, Warszawa 1987, p. 316-320.

based solely on the J.A. Stevenson's work.¹⁵ Some authors linked the project method with the complex method used in the Soviet Union.¹⁶

However, the mere mention of the project method, even if deprived of the ideological stigma, could not make this form of work available in Polish schools of the Polish People's Republic era. These schools were, in their roots, far from the idea of autonomous project implementation by releasing students' creative activity, their autonomy, responsibility or activity for their community.

After 1989, the project method began gaining popularity in Polish schools, though not immediately after the socio-political breakthrough. After decades of real socialism, a need and attempts emerged to change schools into a place of truly creative and autonomous development, cooperation and activity, but the processes of transformation in education were characterised by inconsistency of the concept and continuous oscillation "between destabilisation and revolution, reforms and evolutionary nature of change, engagement and controversy, liberal democracy and plebiscite democracy."¹⁷ It was after 10 years since the turning point of 1989 that a radical reform of education took place, which gave rise to some interest in activating methods. At that time, a number of works were published to bring the method to Polish educators.¹⁸ Attention was drawn to its features such as the progressivistic role of the teacher, the subjectivity of the student or the relationship with the broader social environment.¹⁹ When discussing the project method in the publications, authors referred to the W. Kilpatrick's ideas by emphasising the main assumptions of the American thinker: the primacy of acquiring knowledge independently in situations that are related to the life of children and adolescents, decision-making ability of the students, using in the educational work the natural predispositions of the students and the importance of motivation in the project activity.²⁰

Despite many papers providing the theoretical base for the implementation of projects, it was difficult at that time to adopt the project method to be widely used in formal education. Its presence in schools largely depended on the initiative of individual teachers who found support among non-governmental organizations contributing to the dissemination of this manner of working, by proposing thematic projects, by offering educational materials and training to the teachers and young people.

¹⁵ NAWROCZYŃSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 316-320; SOŚNICKI, *op. cit.*, 206; WOŁOSZYN, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

¹⁶ SOŚNICKI, *op. cit.*, p. 209; MIĄSO J., *Historia wychowania. Wiek XX*, Warszawa 1984, p. 64.

¹⁷ ŚLIWERSKI, B., *Manipulacje w polityce oświatowej III RP*, in: *Nauczyciel w krajach postsocjalistycznych. Studium teoretyczno-empiryczne*, Ed. A. WRÓBEL, Łódź 2010, p. 39.

¹⁸ HELM, J.H., Katz, L.G., *Mali badacze. Metoda projektu w edukacji elementarnej*, Warszawa 2003; KRÓLIKOWSKI, J., *Projekt edukacyjny. Materiały dla zespołów międzyprzedmiotowych*, Warszawa 2001; CHAŁAS, K., *Metoda projektów i jej egzemplifikacja w praktyce. W poszukiwaniu strategii edukacyjnych zreformowanej szkoły*, Warszawa 2000; SZYMAŃSKI, *op. cit.*; GOŁĘBNIAK, D., *Uczenie metodą projektów*, Warszawa 2002.

¹⁹ SZYMAŃSKI, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

New core curriculum with the project method

At the time of developing the new national core curriculum for general education in 2008, the project method enjoyed increased interest in the Polish education community. The core curriculum pointed to the need to educate young people towards civic attitudes, engagement in social affairs and cooperation, to which the project method seemed ideally adapted. The sources of inspiration for this approach could vary, but one of them seem to be the alarming findings about the level of social capital of the Polish society, whose characteristics are regularly provided by a study called the *Social Diagnosis (Diagnoza Społeczna)*.²¹ Social capital is recognized as a prerequisite for a well-functioning civil society rooted in “healthy social relationships, the caring for the common good and cooperation,” and the results of the study clearly showed lack of cooperative culture and low trust among Poles.²² Apart from the *Social Diagnosis*, one of the inspirations for changing the core curriculum towards the “pro-social” direction was also the key competences developed by the European Parliament and the Council, which included “entrepreneurship and innovation”, i.e. the ability to implement ideas in real life, which needs creativity, innovation, risk taking, planning and management skills.²³ In addition, Jacek Strzemieczny also points to such sources as the strategy *Poland 2030* and the *Social Capital Development Strategy (Strategia Rozwoju Kapitału Społecznego)* developed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.²⁴

The key competences in the new core curriculum were included in the objectives of general education regarding students’ ability to use the knowledge to perform tasks and solve problems, and the “shaping of students’ attitudes towards their effective and responsible functioning in the modern world.”²⁵ As mentioned above, the new core curriculum was introduced in 2008, and *Civic Education (Wiedza o społeczeństwie)* was chosen as the school subject primarily designed to shape these desired attitudes. One of the general objectives mentioned in the new core curriculum for this subject for junior high schools

²¹ The *Social Diagnosis* is a scientific interdisciplinary project aimed at a comprehensive analysis of the conditions and quality of life of Poles. The *Diagnosis* covers economic and non-economic aspects, including mental well-being, civic engagement or lifestyle. The survey has been conducted periodically every two years (since 2000) and is of a panel nature - the researchers return to the same households and individuals, during the same season of the year (March), which excludes the season effect. Thus, the *Diagnosis* provides an image not only for the present situation, but it allows us to follow social change over the years, CZAPIŃSKI, J., *Wstęp* (Introduction) in: *Diagnoza Społeczna, Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, Ed. J. CZAPIŃSKI, T. PANEK, Warszawa 2011, p. 13.

²² CZAPIŃSKI, J., *Kapitał społeczny*, in: *Diagnoza Społeczna, Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, Ed. J. CZAPIŃSKI, T. PANEK, Warszawa 2011, p. 284-293.

²³ *Lifelong learning — key competences*, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm.

²⁴ STRZEMIECZNY, J., *Jak organizować i prowadzić gimnazjalne projekty edukacyjne. Poradnik dla dyrektorów, szkolnych organizatorów i opiekunów projektów*, Warszawa 2010.

²⁵ Dziennik Ustaw, *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 23 grudnia 2008 r. w sprawie podstawy programowej wychowania przedszkolnego oraz kształcenia ogólnego w poszczególnych typach szkół*, Dz.U. [Journal of Laws] No. 4 Item 17. p. 206).

is the “Cooperation in Public Affairs. (The student cooperates with others – he plans the tasks, shares them and implements them).”²⁶ In the specific requirements of the document we can find a section concerning participation of citizens in public life. Its implementation is supposed to be possible by developing, either individually or in a team, a student project addressing one of the school or local community problems and, if possible, making it real (e.g. as a volunteer).²⁷ For the fourth stage of education, i.e. senior high schools, the core curriculum for basic and extended subjects develops the general objective, adding that the student shall “effectively use the procedures and opportunities offered to citizens by institutions of public life; know and apply the principles of self-organization and self-help.”²⁸ (The document points out that classes in the subject concerned are to shape attitudes of tolerance, civic engagement, social sensitivity, responsibility and should also enhance the sense of social cohesion). The postulates of the cited *Social Diagnosis* is reflected in the core curriculum by a provision about the need for the school to provide such conditions so that pupils can take part in the local community life, make contacts and cooperate with social organisations, participate in civic campaigns and build a sense of “engagement in social life and trust in other people.”²⁹ Student’s project is the element to be used as a “carrier” of the above content under the new core curriculum - about 20% of teaching content in junior high schools and 10% of senior high schools should be implemented through projects. The core curriculum sets out that by implementing a project the student chooses the problem or activity covered by the project, looks for ways to examine and solve the problem or to conduct the activity, performs thoughtfully and consistently the planned endeavour, organises his or her own work while cooperating with other team members, and finally presents the project to the public.³⁰ The legal basis for implementing the projects methodology to schools was the *Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 20 August 2010 amending the Regulation on the conditions and manner of assessing, classifying and promoting school and university students and conducting tests and examinations in public schools*. We can find in this document that a project is a “team-work, planned activity of students, aimed at solving a specific problem, using a variety of methods.” The regulation further specifies the stages of a project (selection of subject matter, definition of objectives and steps, performance of actions, public presentation of results).³¹

²⁶ *Podstawa programowa z komentarzami. Vol. 4. Edukacja historyczna i obywatelska w szkole podstawowej, gimnazjum i liceum*. Warszawa 2008, p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 110-111.

³¹ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 20 sierpnia 2010 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie warunków i sposobu oceniania, klasyfikowania i promowania uczniów i słuchaczy oraz przeprowadzania sprawdzianów i egzaminów w szkołach publicznych*, Dz.U. [Journal of Laws] No. 156 Item 1046.

Together with the document referred to, the implementation of school projects has been legally approved as a desirable method of action, which certainly contributes to its wide use. On the other hand, there is a danger that the formalisation of the obligation to carry out a project will cause or have already caused the perception of this type of activity as a yet another mandatory requirement that becomes part of the school routine instead of a truly creative educational adventure.

Conclusion

The project method, although it has been present in our educational discourse for nearly a century, became formally binding with the development of the new core curriculum in 2008. As noted above, the legal adoption does not necessarily have to be reflected in the practical implementation of the idea of projects, in which authenticity and spontaneity of action are essential. Furthermore, it should be noted that for many decades the method discussed was hardly present in Polish education, whether due to its novelty nature in the pre-war period or ideological incompatibility in the period before 1989. It remains a question of whether, after years of practical absence of the method and lack of socio-cultural context in which it was conceived, we can actually implement it in order to contribute to the growth of social capital, i.e. to build a cooperation and trust society. In this context, the overview of the history of the project method in Poland makes us reflect upon the need for continuous and intensive education and training of teachers in this field. Another topical issue is what place will this method take in the ever changing reality, especially in relation to the new core curriculum that is currently under development. It would be very bad if, as it happened in the past, the method were gotten rid of as a culturally incompatible and socially unnecessary pedagogical idea.

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