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## **Education Policy as Public Policy**

### **Polityka edukacyjna jako polityka publiczna**

**Abstract:** This article examines the education policy currently implemented in Poland through the lens of understanding, characteristics, and functions of public policy. The analysis is framed within a metatheoretical perspective, referencing the concept of long duration. To illustrate the practice of education policy as a form of public policy, determinations have been made regarding the nature of public policy, its theoretical foundations, aims, and practical priorities. The conclusion highlights selected examples of actions and phenomena that illustrate how education policy deviates from public policy principles, along with research examples that provide theoretical foundations for the desired changes.

**Keywords:** policy, public policy, education policy, public policy sciences.

### **Introduction**

In the analyses below I propose to regard the education policy (currently implemented in Poland) in the context of understanding, characteristics, and functions of public policy.

### **A metatheoretical perspective**

In conducting the analyses as outlined above, I adopt a metatheoretical perspective concerning the understanding of the categories most important for the argumentation. This includes the characteristics and constitutive features of public policy as a concept, with designations that encompass well-defined activities performed at the macro-social level. At the same

time I assume that evoking these categories makes it possible, in a specific context, to reinterpret the activities carried out as part of the education policy currently implemented in Poland. The analyses included in this text are based on experiencing of the world (including its social reality) with understanding, which serves as the source of a metatheoretical point of reference for scientific research (Krúger, 2005, p. 148).

### **Categorical findings**

Categorical findings serve as an equally important theoretical context. This refers to the meaning of concepts of education policy and public policy or public policies, as well as identification of the designators for these terms. For the sake of clarity, let us assume that education policy refers to the design, formation and creation of educational strategies, and further to planning the development of educational system, understood as “all forms of education and upbringing: institutionalized and non-institutionalized, formal and non-formal (including home education) that function in a given country, all the educational institutions, including higher education, culture and upbringing, as well as other institutions providing all levels of education to children, teenagers, and adults” (Nowakowska-Siuta, 2019, p. 291). Understood in this way, education policy is a purposeful and organized activity of state and local authorities, whose task is to determine the goals and objectives of education, upbringing and care, its resources and forms of ensuring the right conditions for the effective implementation of the adopted goals, objectives and educational standards. The basic ‘tools’ for the implementation of education policy are: law, institutions and organizations (Banach, 2003, p. 524).

### **Categories of long duration**

The third theoretical context to which I refer involves the concept of long duration, a theoretical framework derived from humanist and social thought in its broadest sense. This framework shifts our focus from singular events to ongoing processes. As Krzysztof Wielecki points out, processes of key importance are those that persist over extended periods, shaping the broadest social spaces over time. Reinterpreting or reconstructing such processes encourages us to seek the essence of change, fostering reflections that are valuable for contemplating the future. By also considering the cyclical or repetitive nature of certain processes, sequences of events, or conditions,

the temporal perspective evolves into a robust intellectual construct<sup>1</sup>. Hence, following Krzysztof Wielecki, I assume that processes are “(...) sequences of events happening over a period of time, characterized by a separate logic of their own” (Wielecki, 2012, p. 318). I also assume that doing politics is processual in nature. After all, when conducting analyses we often refer to political processes, or the conditions for taking political decisions (cf. Świstak, 2018).

In order to show what processes, changes or effects of actions should be associated with practicing education policy as public policy, I will indicate:

1. What is public policy and what are its theoretical sources?
2. What are the goals and priorities of public policies?
3. Whether and to what extent a research approach based on public policy can have explanatory power concerning the goals of education policy and, further, the quality of educational activities?

### **1) What is public policy and what are its theoretical sources?**

Max Weber claimed that with the development of civilization, a process of searching for more and more rational organizational forms of state functioning will unfold, to solve collective problems. Given these conditions, there will be a kind of separation, a division between party politics and public policy. And the latter is supposed to symbolize a typically rational approach to analyzing problems and working out their solutions. Public policy, however, as a term has Anglo-Saxon origins. From the etymological perspective it should be noted that in English there are two words – ‘politics’ and ‘policy’ – which we translate into Polish in the same way – polityka.

To put it simply, ‘politics’ refers to the struggle for power within or over the state, exemplified by the activities of political parties during the pre-election period. In contrast, ‘policy’ involves the application of that acquired power to achieve various goals, such as the government’s and administrative bodies’ efforts to maintain order, provide education, and support families. The lack of a clear distinction between these terms in Polish gives rise to confusion. If we adopted a naming convention similar to the Anglo-Saxon one, with two different nouns for the two meanings, e.g. polityka and rządzenie, then one could distinguish between the science of politics (where the goal is power over the state) and the science of governance (where power over the state is a means to achieve goals other than power) (Szarfenberg, 2013, p. 11).

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<sup>1</sup> “A sociologist is primarily interested by processes, not events. In particular, s/he finds important such processes that last for a long time, giving structure to the widest social space possible in long time sequences” (K. Wielecki, 2012, p. 309).

Hence, “public policy serves to organize public tasks, encompassing everything from their design and implementation to the evaluation of their results. It can be defined as a series of processes undertaken by the administration to fulfil its mission of addressing public needs.” (Woźnicki, 2012, p. 134).

However, we should remember that the Polish term *polityka* can be used in four different meanings (with two terms covering the meanings in English):

4. Politics is one of the three main dimensions of functioning of the society, alongside the economy and culture. In this sense, politics is considered a part of a social subsystem, the attribute of which is power.
5. Politics means the totality of political organizations, of which the most important is the state. In this sense, politics is understood as a political system.
6. Politics means the deliberate action of political actors, who are thereby engaged in politics.
7. Policy is a specific field of action of a public authority, e.g. economic policy or education policy (Hausner, 2007, after: Kozaczka, 2016, p. 326).

Jerzy Hausner analysed the conceptual and theoretical relationship between the four planes of *polityka* (politics/policy): „discursive (polis), structural (political system), behavioral (political activity), functional and technical (public policies)” (Hausner, 2007, p. 43).

In his opinion, in each case we can consider a different objective scope of power:

- In case of the discursive plane, this is the power over the meaning,
- In case of the structural plane – power over the system,
- In case of the behavioral plane – power over decision-making processes,
- In case of the functional and technical plane – power over resources (Hausner, 2007, p. 43).

In this context, it is essential to understand the term ‘policy’ as the management of public affairs and activities across various spheres of social life, all aimed at achieving the common good.

## **2) What are the goals and priorities of public policies?**

Harold Lasswell, recognized as the founder of the science of public policies as a separate field of knowledge, considered this science as an applied field of knowledge that combines the activities of the following groups:

academics, government policy makers and citizens. According to H. Lasswell, this science is characterised by:

- a multidisciplinary approach (since sectoral policies can be understood by seeing the scale of their dependence on the state of other policies),
- focus on problems that are addressed in specific situational contexts,
- normative orientation (rooted in humanistic values; we want to solve a problem because it is required by our values) (after: Wielecki, 2012, p. 23).

In its broadest sense, public policy is “(...) a term defining rationalized public activities and programs that are based on accumulated, relatively objectified knowledge and a systematized process of designing and executing these activities” (Zybała, 2012, p. 24). When it comes to their subject, public policies encompass nearly every aspect of the national and local government’s activity. The term ‘public policy’ covers ideas for solving public problems, the activities carried out to address these issues, and their resulting outcomes. It represents a systematic approach to tackling key problems faced by citizens. Professional design and implementation of policies lead to effective public actions that help manage crises and address significant social challenges. This process is directly connected to managing public resources in such a manner as to achieve outcomes aligned with the values of a particular society. The implementation of public policies understood in this way requires at least a framework consensus between individual interest, general social interests, or national interests. Hence “the science of public policy is rooted in humanistic values, as it sees social groups explaining a problem according to their values” (Hesse-Gawęda, 2018, p. 304). According to Anna Hesse-Gawęda:

public policies can be described as government actions aimed at achieving specific public goals and taking into account public opinion. Their main purpose is to solve public problems that are considered most important at any given time. It encompasses the key aspects of defining the problem, then determining the goal to be achieved and selecting the appropriate policy instruments to accomplish the task (Hesse-Gawęda, 2018, p. 304)

Andrzej Zybała emphasises that the implementation of public policies is “(...) a process of analysing and designing solutions to public problems” (Zybała, 2012, p. 7). It is therefore (...) the field of systemic, orderly activities of the state and its citizens, which (...) stem from the objectified knowledge

produced and are undertaken to solve key collective problems. They are performed with the help of a number of specific tools, such as: regulations (legal, but also self-regulations of various groups of citizens or of businesses), cooperation, argumentation, debating, research, developing positive incentives to adopt expected attitudes, indicators of the effectiveness of actions, evaluation, expertise (policy analysis), institutions (public offices and networks of social organizations) (Zybała, 2012, p. 13)

Therefore, public policies address those needs, issues, or phenomena that constitute a web of interdependent problems. Finding solutions and monitoring them determines the development opportunities of a society as a whole, but also the quality of life of individuals, citizens. According to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, the adjective ‘public’ means: “intended for the general public, universally available, non-private.” Hence, analyzing the implementation of public policies is a primary method for studying and describing the state’s operations as a system of organizational forms. This analysis goes beyond examining the actions and functions of successive governments, delving into **the core aspects of state functioning** as emphasized by political scientists. It focuses on how the state addresses the key problems and challenges that impact the society it governs. The above analysis includes: legal and regulatory aspects of public policies; forms, methods and tools of action; knowledge of the results of public activity; actors of public activity, both governmental (teams of institutions) and non-governmental (NGOs, interest groups, etc.); necessary human capital (qualifications and skills), organizational capital, social capital (mechanisms of cooperation), intellectual capital (resources of knowledge about problems, methods of studying problems) (cf. Zybała, 2013, pp. 34-38). Emphasizing the evaluation of public activities as a standard of management in the public sector is crucial. The more so that

every public policy involves stakeholders—participants or actors with varying degrees of interest in the policy’s formation and decisions. These stakeholders include ruling politicians, opposition politicians, administrative staff, NGO activists, professional organizations (such as employers’ organizations and trade unions), informal citizen groups, and individual citizens. Each of these groups contributes, to different extents, to the final shape of the policy (Zybała, 2012, p. 65).

There are numerous such policies, including family, health, educational, economic, social benefits, employment, and environmental policies, among others. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish public policy from

politics, understood as the competition between political parties. As Artur Wołek points out,

public policy represents a specific approach to politics, emphasizing the activities of public authorities aimed at solving problems of collective (public) importance. Unlike the dominant understanding of politics, which focuses on competition and the struggle for power and resources, public policy centers on selecting and implementing paths to address public problems (Wołek, 2021, p. 11).

The essence of practicing, or implementing, public policy lies in choosing a course of action that maximizes the realization of the public good. At the same time, I assume that the public good equates to the common good. As Zybala (2012) notes, “mature implementation of public policies requires that the public, through its representatives, can perceive the scale and importance of phenomena and events crucial to its development and general well-being” (p. 46). I also assume that in this context it is possible to think about the quality of education in terms of practicing public policy, and that public policy sciences can provide a theoretical framework for reconstructing the thinking about educational policy. It should also be remembered that the study of public policies represents a specific interdisciplinary approach to policy (cf. Wołek, 2021, p. 10). Following this perspective, I am convinced that within this context, it is possible to examine the role and place of education in the public service sector, seek an optimal model of educational policy, and rethink the most important issues related to Polish education policy.

It should also be emphasized that

(...) according to Samuelson, public goods are defined by two specific criteria: non-competition in consumption and the impossibility of excluding individuals from access to these goods. The first criterion narrows the number of phenomena that qualify as public goods, as it postulates that the consumption of given goods by individuals does not reduce their availability to others. Knowledge and scientific discoveries largely meet these criteria, while other goods do so to a much lesser extent or not at all. The second criterion requires that no one can be excluded from access to goods, as there are no technical means of such exclusion (Surdej, 2021, p. 34).

Thus, the key decision for education policy is determining the role of the state: does it merely plan and organize educational services, or does it also provide them? An important characteristic of any education system is

its degree of decentralization, the autonomy of educational institutions, the definition and verification of qualifications, and the determination of the length of the period of universal education during which students follow the same core curriculum. Particularly significant aspects of education policy, as a public policy, include the regulation of the teaching profession (whether through an open or rigid model of professional promotion), the measurement of educational outcomes, the evaluation of educational institutions, and the assessment of the entire educational system in a given country, especially in the context of international surveys of students' knowledge and skills.

I will refer to the above dimensions of education policy in the conclusion. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that educational policy focuses primarily on formal education, i.e. on organized education leading to the attainment of certain state-recognized qualifications; it also defines the conditions and support for non-formal education. In practice, education policy focuses on the period from pre-school education to vocational and higher education, including also adult education and, in some countries, elements of education implemented in the care of the youngest. Due to significant differences in organization, funding, goals, and challenges, education policy is often divided into several distinct areas: school system and early childhood education policy, higher education policy, and adult education policy (cf. Nowakowska-Siuta, 2019, p. 291). In recent years, vocational training policies have also emerged as a distinct category, focusing on the relationship between formal education and the development of competencies in the workplace (cf. Jakubowski, 2021, p. 155). A. Zybała stresses that "public policy is an arena of collective action that is taken in response to the most important problems of a given society. As a rule, the formatting of actions is to be based on objectified and up-to-date knowledge at a given time, and their execution is within the framework of a systematized process of their design and implementation. Their goal is to create conditions for sustainable development of a society and its members (Zybała, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, public policy should be an activity grounded in consensus regarding the scope and quality of public services. It should foster cooperation between diverse communities and social groups, adopt a long-term decision-making horizon with a sense of responsibility for its consequences, and strive to meet the needs of citizens (cf. Kozaczka, 2016, p. 328). Therefore public policies, interpreted in the category of lengthy processes, are so clearly distinguished from politics, meaning the struggle to gain power in the state, which most often has a clearly outlined time frame, such as the date of the next election or the length of the election campaign. Policy, on the other hand, involves

the application of acquired power to achieve various objectives, such as raising societal welfare, meeting public needs, fostering economic growth, ensuring a high level of environmental protection, and maintaining security. Importantly, such actions can be undertaken by both the government and administrative bodies. In this context, power in the state serves as a means to achieve goals beyond the mere possession of power or the satisfaction of individual needs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the areas of interest for politics and policy are quite distinct (Tkaczyński and Świstak, 2015, p. 11-12). Thomas Burkland identifies six common elements that define public policy:

1. It is formulated in response to problems that require attention due to their significance;
2. It is conducted in the name of the public interest;
3. It is goal-oriented, primarily focusing on problem solving;
4. Is ultimately formulated by authorities (e.g., the government), even if the impetus for action
5. Originates outside these authorities, such as through interactions between the government and non-governmental actors;
6. It is implemented by public or private actors, each with different interpretations of problems and solutions and varying motivations for action;
7. It represents the action or inaction of the government concerning a specific problem (after: Świstak, 2018, p. 45).

Thus, conducting politics as a public policy imparts a special significance to the quality of political action, as it represents a precisely conditioned intervention in the course of public affairs.

According to J. Hausner, the implementation of public policies is a multi-phase process with the following phases:

- a. Defining the problem and recognizing it as a matter requiring public intervention (agenda setting);
- b. Formulation of a policy i.e. specific solutions, including analysis of its alternatives;
- c. Legitimization of specific actions, i.e. convincing the public authority actors about the need to take them;
- d. Implementation of specific solutions, including provision of adequate financial, human, and organizational resources;
- e. Evaluation of the implemented solutions and their correction (Hausner, 2007, p. 51).

Hence politics as polis creates a meaningful and discursive framework for political action, including actions related to the education system. Within this not-unchanging framework, political actors can explore alternative courses of action, yet it also imposes clear constraints. Emphasizing the importance of public policies in public discourse enhances their effectiveness. Shifting the focus in politics towards the technical and professional elements – emphasizing public policy and the administrative bodies that implement it – aims to ensure the policy’s success. This shift necessitates a broad public debate on the goals of public policy and their implementation. In this context, the perspective of long duration becomes increasingly significant, along with adopting the principle that reforming and reorganizing activities serve higher goals, rather than short-sighted objectives like maintaining power. The added value of this approach is that when politics is shaped and controlled by public debate, individuals fulfilling the role of citizens become true citizens within the space created by the polis. This interesting cognitive perspective allows for rational reflection on policy/politics understood as a sphere of concrete actions (policy), and not just power struggle (politics). Based on these deliberations, political actors participating in the social space defined by the polis – an entity providing a framework for political organization and actions – are capable of strategic self-reflection and creativity. Consequently, public policy theory is rapidly developing as a distinct discipline, reinforcing the foundations of civil society.

However, the defining criterion of public policy is the recognition of the common (public) good and the contribution to its realization through the actions undertaken. For public policy to be relevant, effective, efficient, useful, and sustainable, it must be grounded in knowledge, or at least in well-informed interpretations of the subject matter and social needs and values. It must undergo rigorous evaluation and, echoing Karl Popper’s assertions, it should maintain an “invariably (albeit constructively) critical attitude” towards the goals set and the means employed in response to changing realities (Osiński, Negacz and Obłąkowska-Kubiak, 2014, p. 9-10).

It should also be remembered that deliberative practices can take various forms, such as public consultations, expert debates, the establishment of consultative bodies, dialogue forums, and exchanges of opinions.

### **3) Conclusion. Selected reflections on the explanatory power of education policy as public policy**

According to A. Zybala, the most important feature of public policy in Poland is statism, that is a model of public activity in which centralized authority reserves the leading role in decision-making processes for itself. Those in power believe they have enough resources and knowledge to independently solve the issues they deem important, addressing them in a specific order through administrative means. When other stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process, it typically occurs under laws crafted by those in power. This statism leads to a lack of conciliation and consensus among public actors and results in inadequate objective analysis of collective problems. Consequently, there is a low level of innovation in programming and implementation, as well as limited deliberation on the issues addressed in public activities (cf. Zybala, 2021).

In this context, the following examples illustrate how Poland's education policy deviates from sound public policy principles:

- Educational policy is used as a tool in partisan political games, aimed at benefiting electoral results rather than serving as a social practice for the common good;
- In Poland, governance is predominantly characterized by legislation and control rather than deliberation and the empowerment of all social actors, which hinders the democratization of public life;
- In public discourse, particularly in the media, there is a lack of reliable information about the actual effects of implemented educational policies. When reports are made public, their content is often prepared and interpreted in various ways (e.g., the results of PISA studies);
- Expert reports prepared by specialists, including those commissioned by ministerial authorities, are often disregarded if they do not align with party goals;
- At this stage, it is crucial to improve public administration to become an integrator in the creation and implementation of public policies. It should facilitate deliberation and support the development of expert and evaluation studies, while also refining its methods for studying public problems and assessing their resolution.

In the resources of contemporary pedagogical thought there are studies, research results and expert opinions that suggest the desired directions for these changes. Considering the research conducted and published over many years by Bogusław Śliwerski, which includes recommendations for

how educational policy should be practiced based on current pedagogical knowledge within broad interdisciplinary contexts, it is evident that significant changes are necessary. Śliwerski's identified needs for autonomy, democratization, empowerment of all entities, and the socialization of education, as well as counteracting indoctrination and manipulation, align with the principles of implementing education policy as a public policy (cf. Śliwerski, 1998, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2020).

According to B. Śliwerski, socialization is not an end in itself. It should serve to improve the effectiveness of educational and upbringing activities implemented by the school. The greater decision-making freedom granted to schools, and consequently to their internal subjects, can promote the improvement of educational efficiency by increasing motivation, self-reliance and independence (cf. Śliwerski, 2013, p. 19). An example of analyzing the state's role in providing public services, specifically education, and emphasizing education's importance in development is the research conducted by Inetta Nowosad. Her study examines the macro-policy of education implemented in Singapore, which was planned with a long duration in mind and achieved impressive results in just 30 years (cf. Nowosad, 2022). When education policy is practiced as a public policy rather than as a means (tool, instrument) for party interests or achieving non-educational goals, it leads to actions that produce outcomes aligned with the public good. This approach prioritizes the common good over the long duration, rather than focusing on the next parliamentary term and/or upcoming elections.

The dissemination of knowledge about public policy, "(...) raises the awareness and political culture of the public and the political class in this regard, and shows that public policies need reliable knowledge and must be worked out jointly by practitioners from public administration, academics, and citizens together with their social organizations" (Osiński, Negacz and Obłąkowska-Kubiak, 2014, p. 11).

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