

INFLUENCE OF DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE ON SCHOOL LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Background. The article addresses the problem of the influence of dominant discourses in the public sphere on school educational leaders and school reality. The authors focus on two factors of the school environment – political and marketing, which can have a significant impact on creating their development strategies.

Research aims. The main purpose of the article is to show the mechanisms of discourses which are significantly important in functioning of schools as public organizations, depending on policies.

Methodology. The authors use the analysis of selected theories, including M. Foucault, S. Deetz, E. Noelle-Neumann and review the most important reforms of education after 1989, emphasizing the importance of politics for decisions on the shape of contemporary education.

Key findings. Analysing the current situation of Polish education, which is currently mostly influenced by the right-wing and conservative circles, the Authors point out that there is the possibility of using the national Catholic ideology by schools for marketing purposes, dictated solely by the market interests of schools.

Keywords: discourse, educational leadership, marketing in education, education policy, mass communication.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations do not function in a vacuum. They are an element of a system of mutual relations and connections between various entities, at the same time the organisations themselves also influence their

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surroundings. In the strategic management theory, the study of the external environment, including the macro-environment of the organisation, is the standard stage of strategic analysis. One of the techniques used in this study is the PEST analysis, which combines various types of external factors (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, and in the extension of this technique also – ecological), which should be taken into account when considering how these factors may affect the structure of our sector's operations (Stabryła, 2002, p. 146). All these factors, to a varying degree, affect the everyday functioning of schools, upbringing and learning, the development of entities forming the school. The school head, who is responsible for educational and management processes, will therefore take these factors into account when preparing the institution's development strategy. In the article, we want to look at two areas influencing educational schools and leaders: politics and the market, as factors of macro environment, in the context of ongoing public discourses, signalling only emerging observations due to multi-aspect issues.

School or, more broadly, education, as the example of Finland shows, may be a politically independent institution, in the sense that ad hoc policies do not undermine the long-term strategies adopted in education (Sahlberg, 2015). In Poland it is rather difficult to find evidence of school being separated from politics, which we will write about in the further part of the article. The created educational policy usually arises from the ideology chosen by the ruling authorities and is subordinated to it. The principal of the school, together with his or her team, carries out tasks in accordance with applicable law, modified, as the experience of the last nearly 30 years has shown, for the needs of those currently governing. The question that is bothering us is: how much school can become subordinated to the ideologies currently governing a democratic state? Do those in charge care, in accordance with the principles of democracy, to create space for dialogue, allow public critical remarks, or allow polemics? Are the opposing voices included in the proposed solutions? How can the conducted political discourse influence the principals of schools and the everyday life of these institutions?

The second group of factors affecting the functioning of modern organisations, which we would like to draw attention to, are factors related to the market. Many management publications often point out that modern organisations operate in a turbulent environment,

that they need to adequately react to what is happening around, firstly – in the Darwinian spirit – to survive and secondly to gain a competitive advantage on the market. Is it also related to schools and to what extent? Who should they compete with and why? Public schools financed from public funds do not necessarily have to use market mechanisms to function. Is this the case? Can they not join the market fight? (See, for example, the critical position of Potulicka and Rutkowiak, 2010). Are schools an element of market discourse or are they neutral? What does this mean for educational leadership at school?

Of course, the area for which the above questions are valid, is very wide. In our essay, as we have already pointed out, we will narrow it to signal the problem of the influence of dominating discourses in the public communication space on schools. We will look mainly at how currently dominant political and market discourses can affect educational leadership and, consequently, the everyday life of the school and how these discourses can affect each other. The purpose of this article is to pre-identify this problem.

IMPACT OF POLITICAL CHANGES ON EDUCATION

An interesting moment to observe changes taking place in schools is a political change. Following what has been going on in Polish education after 1989, one can notice that the change of the ruling political formation was usually associated with smaller or larger changes in the Polish education. Marta Zahorska even calls this situation “unbearable lightness of reforming education” (Zahorska, 2016). What political predecessors had developed was considered to be wrong or at least requiring some correction. The reform of 1999 was the biggest reform in education over the last quarter of a century. In a few sentences, we will remind you what the structural reform, which introduced many changes in the curricula and education, assessment of students or management and supervision in education, referred to. The most important goals of this reform were: reducing educational inequalities, improving the quality of teaching, and rationalising expenses (Zahorska, 2009). To implement these objectives the authorities, among other things, decided to change the structure of education: 6-year primary schools (in place of 8-year),

3-year middle schools (as a new type of school), 3-year high schools (in place of 4-year), 3–4-year technical college (in place of 5-year), 2–3-year basic vocational schools. Curriculum changes were proposed, a multiplicity of curriculum and textbooks was allowed for each subject, combined with the core curriculum and standard requirements, which was supposed to guarantee the acquisition of comparable skills. The system of external, unified test exams was introduced, created by the Central Examination Board. In principle, the results of the exams allowed to assess the level of a student's educational achievements compared to others. The rules of financing schools were changed, the calculation of educational subsidies was primarily dependent on the number of students. The governing bodies of the schools were local governments, and substantive supervision was exercised by the education superintendents. Schools have to create their statutes and regulations, develop assessment principles, set a system of penalties and prizes. It was agreed that in their creation, apart from teachers, also students and parents should participate. A four-level professional promotion scale for teachers was also proposed (trainee, contractual, appointed, and certified). Therefore, these changes referred to many areas of the way the school functioned, their scale was impressive. As Zahorska points out, the reform was an attempt to take into account the demands of both the right-conservative AWS and the neoliberal Freedom Union. Formulating the goal of the reform – equalising the opportunities, references to the demands of left-wing parties were also made (Zahorska, 2009). Thus, ideological pluralism was taken into account, and attempts were made to refer to the interests of various political actors. Nevertheless, according to Zahorska it was insufficient. The author writes:

The undoubted firstborn sin of education reform was the lack of agreement with the opposition parties. (...) Changes in education usually require many years of preparation and an additional few for implementation. Such reforms must obtain the consent of many groups and have a guarantee of continuation despite the change of government. They should also take care to convince teachers and prepare them for change. This type of requirements could not be met in Poland primarily for political reasons (Zahorska, 2009, p. 139).

After 1999, the Polish education reform was carried on, and, among others, a controversial (for the majority of the society) school obligation at the age of six, profiling of high schools, modernisation

of pedagogical supervision, and others were proposed. In 2006, the Ministry of Education and Science was transformed into the Ministry of National Education, and the fact that Roman Giertych took over the position of the minister, also the proposed changes (including secondary school final examinations (pol. “matura”) amnesty, change of the school reading canon) were accompanied by numerous social protests (Hejwosz-Gromkowska, 2009). The latest reform was prepared by the current government of Law and Justice. When we write this article, the reform is just entering schools. What is coming to mind at the moment is the conviction that it wants to be the antithesis of Handke’s reform, the one from 1999: the two-step structure of schools has been returned, eliminating lower secondary schools and restoring an 8-year primary school and 4-year high schools. Observing the actions of the government, it is difficult to talk about the postulate of Zahorska, that education reform should be “agreed by many groups”. On the contrary, it arouses widespread resistance from opposition party groups, including non-parliamentary parties and it is not the result of a compromise. The proposed solutions, including the core curriculum, are also heavily criticised by various environments related to education and academia (see e.g. Position on the announced reform of Polish language education). According to the current Polish government, the introduction of the reform was necessary, mainly because, as assessed, the quality of current education is low, the school has lost its educational role, secondary schools and vocational schools require quick adaptation to the needs of the labour market, and the number of students decreases dramatically due to a demographic decline. On the website of the Ministry of National Education one can read that most Poles want to reform education and that Poles “want a modern school, and at the same time strongly rooted in our tradition” (MEN, 2017). The authors, however, no longer explain what tradition they have in mind. It may be worth mentioning that a primary school lasting 8 years and a 4-year general high school functioned in the communist period from 1961, and after the political change (in 1989) – until 1999. What do the authors of the reform mean by writing about rooting in tradition? Which tradition? Does this word appear only as a catchy slogan in the ongoing discourse by the ruling authorities and their supporters?

Table 1. A summary of the most important changes in educational reforms in Poland in 1999 and 2017

School reforms	Goal of reforms	Most important changes
1999	Reducing educational inequalities improving the quality of teaching and rationalising expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 6-year primary schools (instead of an 8-year one), – 3-year junior high school (as a new type of school) – 3-year high schools (instead of 4-year-ones), – 3–4-year technical college (in place of 5-year ones), – 2–3 years basic vocational schools, – curriculum changes, – curriculum pluralism, – system of external, unified test exams, created by the Central Examining Board, – new rules for financing schools, calculating educational subsidies dependent primarily on the number of students, – local government as the school’s governing body, – education offices performing content-related supervision, – independently created statutes and regulations, moreover independently established assessment regulations, system of penalties and prizes by schools, – increasing the involvement of students and parents in school activities, – introduction of a four-level scale of professional promotion for teachers (trainee, contractual, appointed, and qualified)
2017	Raising the level of teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – return to the 8-year primary school, – liquidation of junior high schools, return to a 4-year high school, – abolition of compulsory education for 6-year-olds, – elimination of the test for sixth graders, – changes in the core curriculum for classes 1, 4, and 7, – change of the grant system

Source: own research based on: MEN – Educational Reform; Hejwosz-Gromkowska, 2009; Zahorska, 2009; Zahorska, 2016.

FIGHT FOR “THE TRUTH” AND COMMUNICATION OMNIPRESENCE

It is difficult these days to refuse the truth to the popular conviction “there is no such thing as bad publicity” when it comes to the aspirations of some people or organisations to get publicity necessary to achieve the goals, no matter what the ethical or factual quality of the coverage would be (the must of “being visible” was accurately described by Umberto Eco in the series of columns; Eco, 2016). Recognition, publicity are essential elements of gaining communication advantage

in the media, public and political spheres. The advantage is to be able to successfully convince to one's vision of the world, including the vision of a modern school. All possible communication channels are used for this purpose.

In Poland, in recent years, two opposing political discourses have become more powerful: the "centre-right" and "liberal", which have been existing in the public and media sphere for over twenty years. In 1997, Monika Kwiecińska, referring to the theory of Michael Foucault, made an interesting analysis (Kwiecińska, 1997). Social change, as the author points out, is the effect of the game of discourses, the struggle for the validation of certain versions of reality. To "tame", to adopt it as "yours" discourse is the result of giving it the status of truth. Speaking the truth, striving to show the truth, "fight for the truth" – these are frequent key words in political messages. On the other hand, according to the constructivists, resembles Kwiecińska, "truth" is a social construct, in the sense that discourses are created in the game. It is both a tool and an effect of power. The fight for power is a battle of discourses. A higher status, credibility is obtained by this discourse, which will be able to unmask others, but also – remove them beyond the margin of social reality, make them absent (Kwiecińska, 1997). Making a coherent group of opinions absent in the public space seems obvious in relation to the information monopoly situation, and therefore the monopoly of power. In countries that want to be called democratic, by definition, there are combative, different truths, and therefore different discourses. In this context, it is worth quoting the words of Monika Kwiecińska, who in 1997, announcing the subject and purpose of her research, wrote:

On the example of the center-right and liberal discourse in Poland will be shown how, thanks to the existing social change, in the struggle for power they compete with each other versions of social reality, and at the same time visions of the Polish state. The victory of one of these discourses would determine (or at least affect) the further direction of changes in Poland, because the discourse that dominates the game in the game also achieves the possibility of manipulating the mechanisms of marginalization of other discourses and even their complete exclusion (Kwiecińska, 1997, p. 219).

The significance of obtaining a communication advantage – the silencing of one opinion and strengthening others was noticed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to the researcher, there is a

certain relationship between mass communication, interpersonal communication, and the pure individual's perception of the opinions of others (Noelle-Neuman, 1974, for: Dobek-Ostrowska, 2004, p. 72). Noelle-Neumann assumed that most people express opinions in line with the opinions of the majority. The reason is, according to the author, the fear of rejection and isolation. The minority often hides his or her actual opinion on a topic or changes it to suit the majority. This is what causes a spiral of silence – some opinions are publicised, others are silenced. According to the researcher, the media play a large role in this process, which pick up the opinions of the majority and make them public. This process causes the escalation of “righteous” opinions and, to an even greater extent, the silencing or absence of opposite opinions. An opinion considered dominant gains higher status, is more audible and known. An individual who does not share the opinion universally recognised as true (as he/she perceives the reality sanctioned by the mass media), does not have to change his/her mind privately, but withdraws from the public sphere (Noelle-Neuman, 1974, for: Dobek-Ostrowska, 2004, p. 72).

It is also worth referring here to the Durkheim concept (1968), indicating the dominance of the social dimension of phenomena. The social phenomena are those phenomena which are characterised by universality, externality, and coercion. Thus, facts that are external to the individual initially, turn into convictions or rules, shared by representatives of a given community and strongly influence the individual. The importance of coercion should be emphasised here, the pressure which obliges the individual to submit to the collective. As Durkheim emphasises:

(...) submitting to these convictions/rules without reservation, you undoubtedly will not feel the pressure they exert, but they will become visible when we try to resist. Let the individual try to oppose one of these collective manifestations, and the feelings he denies will turn against him (Durkheim, 1968, p. 35).

In light of this concept, the school head is particularly vulnerable to the pressure of the community; the way of thinking, acting or perceiving phenomena prevailing in his/her consciousness, that social fact, which it will be difficult to oppose.

In the context of our problem, Stanley Deetz's theory seems to be interesting as well. The author sees the strongest influence on

the lives of modern people in the development of large international corporations, in the way that is not comparable with any government or public institution (Deetz, 1992, for: Griffin, 2003, p. 290). Deetz does not refer his theory to public organisations. However, one can ask if the influence of a corporation is so overwhelming and regulates our lives, then whether “market thinking” really applies only to companies, or whether this way of thinking also influences organisations such as school. According to many studies, the dictate of the market is also present in schools, as companies make efforts to acquire clients among students and the entire school community (Wolk, 2005; Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010). Schools try to raise funds for their activities in various ways. Principals, also in Poland, have been talking about the necessity of conducting marketing activities, about the managerial nature of their work (Hall, 2007). Schools introduce to their operation methods transferred from the market, from the concept of management of contemporary companies.

INCORPORATING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS INTO AN IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

School is an object of political interest. The seizure of power does not mean that any of the discourses is automatically marginalised as long as there are conditions for it to resonate in public and private spaces. The situation of political change is, however, an important signal for schools and school principals that the ideology proclaimed by the current ruling authorities will be prevailing. In countries with an established democracy, there is usually no threat to the continuation of school programmes and structures. In what way and how much the school curriculum will be changed, which goals will be a priority in educational policy after the change of the ruling authorities, and whether they will take care of the coexistence in the school of various discourses is a kind of test whether the state still functions as democratic and supporting dialogue or is becoming a gagging state that hinders pluralism of opinion in the public sphere or even annihilating it. On the other hand, as Foucault pointed out, the discourses are further defined in the mutual game – they are self-defining on the principle of contradiction, contrast, and separateness. They exist when they are aware of the existence of

“counter-truths”, opposites, other ideologies, approaches, locating itself in opposition.

For two years, a new government has been in charge in Poland, launching and upholding the “centre-right” discourse, close to the national-Catholic ideology. The centre-right in Poland is described by Kwiecińska as the one who adheres to tradition, national heritage, Catholicism, its values and ethics. Poland’s sovereignty is understood by the centre-right as independence from the influence of both Western Europe and Russia. As Kwiecińska writes: “such a concept of Poland also gives a quite special status to the truth, it seems to take on an absolute quality” (Kwiecińska, 1997, p. 219). The right-wing discourse heading to the national-Catholic one will emphasise patriotic attitudes in education, will focus on building national identity, celebrating the martyrological past of the Poles and emphasising Poland’s Christian foundations, especially Catholic ones.

When we observe the political scene in the last two years, there have been clear symbolic actions supporting and strengthening the centre-right discourse – in opposition to the “liberal” one. Beyond the verbal sphere, attention is drawn to the visual layer, e.g.:

- the removal of the European Union flags during the Prime Minister’s conference (Newsweek, 2016),
- public manifestation of attachment to national colours and symbols: the head of the ruling party’s white-and-red cape, a symbol of fighting Poland (from World War II) on the mobile of the Minister of Defence (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2017),
- promoting a patriotic outfit by the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda (Newsweek, 2016).

It is a discourse that attempts to build new myths (e.g. cursed soldiers), and point to new symbols (e.g. the plane crash in Smolensk). One can see the demonstration of patriotism during various state, environmental, party, and religious events, e.g. on processions, appeals, anniversaries, or so-called “Monthly” (an organised monthly in Warsaw in memory of people, including President Lech Kaczyński, who died in the plane crash in Smolensk in 2010). There is a visible presence of representatives of the Catholic Church – in public media, but also in the public presence of politicians from the ruling party in various religious ceremonies. The statements and actions of the party currently in charge in Poland include slogans related to the promotion of the “traditional” family model, Christian values (and even the postulate

of re-Christianisation of Europe), the total ban on abortion, the policy of “getting up from the knees” with relation to other countries, opposition to accepting refugees in Poland (see Fronda, 2017; *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2018; *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 2016). To this set have come various political decisions of the ruling authorities that are supposed to strengthen their and their supporters’ conviction about Poland’s sovereignty: decision on the ongoing felling of trees in the Białowieża Forest, despite the prohibition of the Court of Justice of the European Union, proposals for laws regarding the judiciary, which are incompatible with European Union law. It is worth noting that the discourse run by the ruling party and close to its environment seems to be convincing for a large percentage of Poles. For example, an increasing number of Poles are opposed to accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa (CBOS, 2017; *Rzeczpospolita*, 2017). This is in line with the position of the Polish government communicated to the Poles. This discourse is important for schools, it resounds as the voice of the current ruling party, strongly identifying itself with its main slogans and actively participating in the creation of reinforcing messages.

On the other hand, as it has already been emphasised, for the last quarter of a century the strong influence on thinking about the functioning of the school as an organisation has had classical theories of management and the dogma of a free market, competition, and the use of marketing tools to run schools. Therefore, the question arises how these two discourses will co-exist: market and national-Catholic. Are they excluded or can they support each other? How will they affect the school principals?

Following the lead of Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, it can be assumed that the national-Catholic discourse can become stronger if it is increasingly the voice of the media. The more messages are conveyed in this spirit, the stronger may be the conviction about the dominant character of this discourse, the universality of this way of thinking and acting. This, in turn, may lead the principals to its official acceptance, especially if they read the expectations of not only the authorities, but also the school’s environment, including teachers and parents. The mechanism of muting alternative opinions to the national Catholic trend can lead to a spiral: the dominant discourse will become even more resonant, the opinions opposite will be less audible.

MARKETISED PATRIOTISM IN SCHOOLS

The influence of the discourse created by the ruling party on the school can have two dimensions: official and unofficial, implemented by a hidden school curriculum. On the one hand, official changes are introduced in the school curriculum, which is close to the ideology of the ruling party or attempts are made to introduce such changes. Examples include changing the reading set for primary and secondary schools in the direction of national literature (see ORE, 2017; Dziennik Ustaw, 2017) changes in teaching history with a clear focus on Polish history, not general one (especially in primary school), changes in the subject “family life education”, changes in teaching biology (less emphasis on the theory of evolutionism), plans for introducing military and civil defence training. On the other hand, messages close to the national Catholic ideology can be transmitted as part of a hidden programme. Teachers identifying with this ideology may become, in a more or less conscious and purposeful way, broadcasters of messages compatible with it, also beyond the knowledge of the principal, outside the official school curriculum. These messages can be carried out in everyday lessons, but also by affirming selected holidays, celebrating dates related to national-Catholic ideologies, or abandoning others celebrated so far, and inconsistent with the ideological message. This communication can also take place during celebrations, various school events, by inviting people close to ideologies, by designing the school’s space (e.g. exhibitions, newsletters). When it comes to the market discourse, paradoxically, although more connected with the liberal trend, it may remain in a certain relation to the national-Catholic discourse, it may play an instrumental and compliant role. Marketing tools used so far may not lose their usefulness, i.e. they may be used to support the desired model of raising a new citizen. This can happen when the principals would understand the parents’ expectations. Paradoxically, patriotism can be “marketised” in schools. In such a scenario, patriotism will become an element of school marketing if it is an effective tool in the struggle to acquire students and is accompanied by the conviction that such actions will trigger a positive reaction of the authorities – local government and curators, exercising pedagogical supervision.

CONCLUSIONS

The essay focuses on the problem of the influence of dominating discourses on school life. Referring to selected theories, possible social mechanisms of discourse activity, which are most pronounced in the space of broadly understood social communication, are shown. The new vision of educational policy communicated by the media, resulting from the adopted policy direction of the state, may influence decisions made by school heads. After the political changes, for almost 30 years, schools and school managers in Poland have constantly, as it has been illustrated, depended on the current educational policy. Also now, the governing party has proposed another reform of the Polish school, this time being a right-wing ideology, strongly emphasising the importance of patriotism in the national-Catholic spirit. It can build an idea of what the contemporary Polish school should be. This may have consequences for the activities undertaken by the principals and schools, both in terms of the implementation of the core curriculum and the school's hidden programme. It may also, as we point out in the article, result in the instrumental use of national Catholic ideology in marketing activities, if principals and schools recognise that such strategies will be effective in competing with other schools, they will correspond to the needs of stakeholders and perceptions of the national Catholic discourse school.

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WPŁYW DOMINUJĄCYCH DYSKURSÓW W SFERZE PUBLICZNEJ NA ŻYCIE SZKÓŁ I PRZYWÓDZTWO EDUKACYJNE

Abstrakt

Tło badań. W artykule podjęto problem wpływu dominujących dyskursów toczonych w sferze publicznej na szkolnych przywódców edukacyjnych i rzeczywistość szkolną. Autorki koncentrują się na dwóch czynnikach otoczenia szkoły – politycznych i rynkowych, które mogą mieć istotny wpływ na kształtowanie ich strategii rozwoju.

Cel badań. Celem artykułu było pokazanie mechanizmów działania dyskursów mających istotne znaczenie dla funkcjonowania szkół jako organizacji publicznych, zależnych od doraźnej polityki oraz potencjalnych skutków tych dyskursów.

Metodologia. Autorki posiłkują się w analizie wybranymi teoriami, m.in. M. Foucaulta, S. Deetz, E. Noelle-Neumann oraz dokonują przeglądu najważniejszych reform oświaty po 1989 roku, akcentując znaczenie polityki dla podejmowanych decyzji dotyczących kształtu współczesnej edukacji.

Kluczowe wnioski. Analiza obecnej sytuacji polskiej edukacji, na którą aktualnie największy polityczny wpływ mają środowiska prawicowe, konserwatywne, wskazuje na to, że istnieje możliwość instrumentalnego wykorzystania ideologii narodowo-katolickiej przez szkoły w celach marketingowych, dyktowana czysto rynkowymi interesami szkół.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs, przywództwo edukacyjne, marketing w edukacji, polityka edukacyjna, komunikacja masowa.