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## **The status of adult education in local education strategies\***

Miejsce edukacji dorosłych w strategiach oświatowych  
na poziomie lokalnym

**Summary.** This article presents findings from research documented in reports prepared as part of a system project co-financed by the European Social Fund. The project was implemented by the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw, in collaboration with the University of Warsaw, under Priority III, Measure 3.1, Sub-measure 3.1.2 of the Human Capital Operational Programme for 2007–2013, Improving education management strategies at the regional and local levels, aimed at monitoring the state of municipal and county education strategies. Based on these reports, the status of adult education within education policy at the municipal and county levels was analysed. The findings indicate that adult education is not a priority for local government authorities, as reflected in their strategic documents. In local communities, education – especially adult education – must compete with other spheres of socio-economic life. The status of adult education in local communities is significantly dependent on local development policies outlined in planning documents, such as local development and education strategies. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen local education policies that focus on adults, particularly at the municipal level, and to establish clear strategic objectives at the county level. Given that this article was written over ten years ago, an effort is made to answer the question of whether any changes have occurred in this area and whether the previously identified trends have intensified or have been rede-

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\* This article was originally published in Polish language in the *Andragogy Yearbook*, 2012, vol. 19, pp. 336–346.

efined, based on analyses of selected contemporary education development strategies.

**Keywords:** adult education, education policy, local community

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł jest prezentacją wyników analizy raportów przygotowanych w ramach projektu współfinansowanego z Europejskiego Funduszu Społecznego, realizowanego przez Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji w Warszawie w partnerstwie z Uniwersytetem Warszawskim, w ramach Priorytetu III, Działania 3.1, Poddziałania 3.1.2 Programu Operacyjnego Kapitał Ludzki na lata 2007–2013 „Doskonalenie strategii zarządzania oświatą na poziomie regionalnym i lokalnym”, monitorujących stan gminnych i powiatowych strategii oświatowych. Na podstawie tych opracowań podjęto się rozpoznania miejsca edukacji dorosłych w polityce oświatowej na poziomie gminy i powiatu. Analiza ta wykazała, że edukacja dorosłych nie stanowi dla lokalnych władz samorządowych priorytetu, który znalazłby odzwierciedlenie w dokumentach strategicznych. W środowiskach lokalnych edukacja, a szczególnie edukacja osób dorosłych, musi konkurować z innymi obszarami życia społeczno-ekonomicznego. Pozycja edukacji dorosłych w środowiskach lokalnych uzależniona jest w znacznym stopniu od lokalnej polityki rozwoju, której wyznaczniki zawierają się w dokumentach planistycznych, jakimi są strategie rozwoju lokalnego i strategie oświatowe. Ważne jest więc, by wzmacniać lokalną politykę oświatową skierowaną do dorosłych, szczególnie na poziomie gminy, jak również konkretyzować założenia strategiczne w tym obszarze na poziomie powiatu. Ze względu na to, że prezentowany artykuł powstał ponad dziesięć lat temu, na podstawie analiz wybranych współczesnych strategii rozwoju oświaty starano się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, na ile w interesującym nas obszarze nastąpiły zmiany i czy trendy zidentyfikowane wcześniej przybrały na sile, czy też uległy przeformułowaniu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja dorosłych, polityka oświatowa, środowisko lokalne

## Introduction

This article was written over a decade ago with the aim of emphasising the importance of adult education in local education policy. Naturally, it is worth examining how the field has evolved since then and whether the trends identified at that time have strengthened or been redefined.

The original article was based on research conducted by the Polish Centre for Education Development. Currently, no compatible studies have been found. Therefore, to update the article, an analysis of seventeen local education strategies was conducted. These strategies were developed either as components of the city's development strategy (Kraków, Warsaw, and Wrocław) or as separate documents in urban municipalities (Poznań, Opole, Łódź, and Bydgoszcz), urban-rural municipalities (Nysa, Piaseczno, Wodzisław Śląski, Świecie, Bielawa, Starachowice, Olecko, and Świebodzice), and rural municipalities (Michałowice and Tarnowo Podgórne). The timeframes of these documents extend to 2026, 2027, or 2030, and their creators classify them as strategies for the development of education, education development programmes, or programmes supporting the development of education.

## **Local education policy**

Education policy is an area of social policy that, broadly speaking, encompasses all issues related to the structure of the education system and the organisation of developmental and educational processes. Like social policy, education policy can be understood both as a practical activity and as an academic discipline. According to A. Kurzynowski (2003), the focus of education policy as an academic discipline lies in determining the optimal principles for disseminating education among children, youth, and adults, with the aim of preparing them for life, work, and active participation in culture. Education policy, understood as a practical activity, encompasses actions undertaken by the state to achieve development and education goals, ensure the material and technical functioning of the adopted education system, and manage institutions involved in this field. As indicated by the above definitions, when education policy is understood as a theoretical activity, it pertains to adults as the group of interest in this field of study. However, in practice, education policy predominantly focuses on children and youth.

The Polish School Education Act of 1991 and the Polish Municipal Government Act of 1990 outline the educational responsibilities of local government. The municipality's responsibilities include meeting the collective needs of the community, which involve organising education with-

in the municipality, such as primary schools, nurseries, and other education facilities.

Specifically, the local government's responsibilities include:

- Ensuring the operational conditions of schools and facilities, including safe and hygienic environments for learning, teaching, and care;
- Performing renovations of school buildings and undertaking investment projects in this area;
- Providing administrative, financial, and organisational support for schools and facilities;
- Equipping schools and facilities with teaching aids and equipment necessary for the full implementation of teaching and educational programmes, conducting assessments and examinations, and performing other statutory tasks (The Polish School Education Act, Journal of Laws of 1991, No. 95, Item 425).

The education policy of local government should define local education priorities and establish a long-term action plan aligned with these priorities. The foundation for developing education policy at the municipal level lies in the general concept of the civilisational development of the local community and the directions of its socio-economic growth. From this foundation, pedagogical objectives planned for schools should emerge, supporting the broader development of the local community

Local development is most often defined through the lens of political, economic, and infrastructural achievements within a given area. However, growing interest in the concept of development within the social sciences has brought increasing attention to its cultural and social dimensions. Local development is said to address local problems (social, economic, political, cultural, or ethnic) and create conditions to meet both individual and collective needs, with the active involvement of local residents.

The guiding principle of local development is "local work for the benefit of the local community using local resources" (Potoczek, 2001, pp. 4–5; own translation). This entails both creating favourable conditions to activate the community and leveraging this activity to shape and manage development processes. These include fostering an environment conducive to entrepreneurship, stimulating innovation, supporting sustainable development, overcoming barriers, improving the "quality of life," and effectively managing local resources (Birkhölzer, 2006, p. 30).

Local development efforts should therefore focus as much as possible on the common good rather than solely on individual benefits. They should not only produce goods and services but also renew environmental, social, and cultural resources necessary for further development. Such efforts should aim to meet unmet needs, offering products and services to all local interest groups, especially marginalised groups with weaker purchasing power, rather than exclusively to privileged groups or those with easy access to social services. Additionally, they should strengthen local social capital and concentrate on community development (Birkhölzer, 2006, pp. 30–37).

When discussing the development of local communities, and referring to the fundamental goals and principles of local community development as outlined by the National Standards Boards for Community Work Training & Qualification, the following objectives are highlighted:

- Developing joint actions, including the establishment and support of civic groups;
- Improving access to information and skills;
- Acquiring or creating new material resources;
- Increasing residents' participation in decision-making processes (Skrzypczak, 2001, pp. 15–17).

The creation of local education policy should be based on identifying local needs and opportunities in education to establish appropriate financial, administrative, and organisational conditions that support the multi-dimensional development of municipal residents. A key goal of education policy should be to promote equal educational opportunities, with particular emphasis on adults. In vocational education, it is crucial to prepare a sufficient number of professionals across various trades and specialities to meet the demands of the economy and help reduce unemployment.

Thanks to the Education Policy of Local Government (POST) project, implemented by the Centre for Civic Education to support local governments in developing procedures for planning education strategies, a growing number of local governments are now striving to create education development strategies in their regions.

As part of the systemic project co-financed by the European Social Fund and implemented by the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw, in collaboration with the University of Warsaw, under Priority III, Measure 3.1, Sub-measure 3.1.2 of the Human Capital Operational Programme for 2007–2013, Improving education management strategies at

the regional and local levels, reports were created to monitor the status of municipal, county, and regional education strategies. To assess the role of adult education in local education policy, reports on education strategies created at the municipal and county levels were analysed.

## **Adult education in municipal education development strategies**

Planning documents related to education in municipalities are referred to by various names, including education development strategy, education development vision, schooling development strategy, schooling development vision, and education development plan (Stanek, 2010, p. 14). Many municipalities do not have separate planning documents specifically addressing education. Instead, education-related sections are often incorporated into basic planning documents, such as local development strategies.\*

The aim of the research that led to the report on the state of education strategies in municipalities was to examine at least thirty existing municipal education strategies, select five for detailed field studies, and, based on the collected data, formulate conclusions, identify the strengths and weaknesses of municipal strategies, and develop a database of best practices. For the research, sixty-two strategic documents in the field of education were collected, but only thirty-six strategies considered complete were subjected to detailed analysis. The selection criteria included the presence of the following components: a diagnosis of the municipality's potential, a SWOT analysis, clearly defined vision and mission, strategic and operational goals, and planned actions (Stanek, 2010, p. 29).

Most of the analysed strategies were developed using the municipality's internal resources. Even when some municipalities commissioned external entities to prepare these documents, the majority of the work was still carried out by internal teams. This included strategic workshops facilitated by an external company. While the analysis of documentation and

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\* The role of adult education in these planning documents is discussed in my article *Samorząd lokalny jako podmiot edukacji dorosłych na przykładzie lokalnych strategii rozwoju* [Local Government as an Entity of Adult Education: A Case Study of Local Development Strategies]. In T. Aleksander (Ed.), *Edukacja dorosłych jako czynnik rozwoju społecznego* [Adult Education as a Factor of Social Development] (Vol. 1, pp. 269–274). ITE-PIB, Radom, 2010.

field visits suggests that hiring an external organisation had positive effects on the document itself, there were instances where the result was the creation of a “dead” document that was “alien” to the community and whose assumptions were not subsequently implemented (Stanek, 2010, p. 29).

The discussed report analysed education strategies using pre-established criteria, most of which focused on the formal aspects of these planning documents. For this study, we will focus exclusively on the category of strategic goals, as they offer valuable insight into the assumptions underlying the education policies of local governments. As the author of the report notes, the strategic goals outlined in the analysed documents were highly diverse, requiring them to be grouped into sets based on similar issues for analysis. These sets were approximate in nature, as the goals were not always clearly defined. In some cases, a single strategic goal included elements spanning more than one proposed group. In such instances, the goal was classified into multiple groups. Often, this classification could only be determined after reviewing the description of the goal or the proposed operational objectives and specific actions associated with it (Stanek, 2010, p. 31).

The author of the report identified the following groups of goals:

- Material base – This group comprised goals related to constructing new buildings, modernising existing ones (including thermal modernisation), purchasing equipment (such as IT infrastructure), acquiring teaching aids, and undertaking other initiatives.
- Education management – This group included goals aimed at enhancing the management of education both at the municipal level and within individual institutions.
- Quality of teaching – This group focused on goals intended to improve the quality of teaching within the core curriculum.
- Expansion of education offerings – This group comprised goals related to introducing additional activities that extended beyond the core curriculum, including foreign language teaching as well as sports and cultural activities.
- Equalisation of educational opportunities – This group included goals related to equalising educational opportunities for students with disabilities, those from at-risk families, weaker students, and others.
- Safety – This group contained goals aimed at ensuring safety, implementing educational programmes, and providing psychological and pedagogical support, among other measures.

- Teaching staff – This group comprised goals focused on improving the quality of work among teaching and managerial staff, promoting professional development, enhancing qualifications, and fostering a teaching ethos.
- Parents – This group included goals aimed at increasing the role of parents in school life or directed towards parents and families, such as enhancing parents' skills and knowledge.
- School network – This group contained goals related to the modernisation (or rationalisation) of the school network.
- Budget – This group included goals related to securing external funding, reducing expenses, and other financial strategies (Stanek, 2010, pp. 31–32).

The above specification shows that no separate category for strategic goals related to adult education, lifelong learning, or continuous education was created. This was because such goals were rarely formulated. Only within the group of strategic goals labelled “Parents” were there a few elements related to adult education. This group included goals aimed at increasing the role of parents in school life, as well as educational initiatives directed towards parents. These initiatives primarily focused on improving their skills and knowledge from the perspective of their parenting role, with particular emphasis on supporting dysfunctional families (Stanek, 2010, pp. 31–34).

The detailed analysis of education strategies identified as good practices revealed several individual strategic goals that could be indirectly considered related to adult education. These include:

- Collaboration with non-governmental organisations and local community activation;
- Supporting the development of the information society;
- Strengthening the role of schools as local centres for culture, lifelong learning, and civic and social activity;
- Supporting employment and the development of small businesses;
- Broadly defined social and vocational activation of adults;
- Activating parents and the local community for the benefit of children and youth.

In two documents, references to promoting lifelong learning were found, and the education strategy of Rawa Mazowiecka municipality mentions supporting the activities of the University of the Third Age and the People's University, operating in the area. While this may not be signifi-



cant given the thirty-two documents analysed, it is still a positive outcome that such references were identified.

Most of the analysed documents did not include higher-level strategic documents. Fewer than half (17) of the strategies examined accounted for demographic, socio-economic, and labour market trends (Stanek, 2010, pp. 44–45).

The author of the report analysing municipal education strategies takes a critical stance, particularly from a formal perspective. For example, a limited connection between the documents and the municipalities' budgetary capabilities is pointed out. As a result, these documents often read more like wish lists for schools rather than documents that could bring about real changes in the local education landscape (Stanek, 2010, p. 11).

## **Adult education in county education development strategies**

To illustrate the role of adult education in education strategies at the county level, this section presents excerpts from the report *Analysis of County Education Strategies*. For this analysis, thirty-two strategic documents from all regions were examined. Similar to the municipal level, there were various documents concerning education policy at the county level. The study included twelve typical education strategies, eight directions/programmes/policies, nine sections of general county development strategies related to education, two draft strategies, one outdated strategy, and one document related to education from the County Labour Office (not a county strategy) (Toft, 2011, p. 6).

The aim of the report was to present the contents of these documents, along with their formal and substantive analysis. For the purposes of this study, strategic goals will be analysed, as these records provide insight into the directions of education policy in counties targeting adults.

Similar to the report on municipal education strategies, the strategic goals identified in the analysed documents were grouped. The most frequently mentioned topics of strategic goals included, in order:

- Improving the quality/level of schooling/education/care;
- Modernising/expanding/reorganising educational infrastructure/facilities;
- Equalising educational opportunities;

- Enhancing access to educational services/improving the state of education in society/raising the education level of society;
- Aligning education with labour market demands;
- Shaping civic/patriotic/pro-social/entrepreneurship attitudes and supporting mental and physical development;
- Promoting the development of lifelong learning;
- Increasing the efficiency of education management;
- Developing specific skills (languages, computer, and “key” competencies);
- Securing external funding for educational purposes and expanding international collaboration in education;
- Increasing the level of/improving the financing of schools and educational institutions (Toft, 2011, p. 7).

The strategic goals of the county education strategies appear significantly more promising than those of the municipal strategies, as they include an entire group of goals related to lifelong learning. In nineteen documents, the issue of adult education is addressed, and although most of the references to lifelong learning are quite broad, they encompass several tasks and even specific actions in this area. According to the author of the report, this is a relatively well-developed area of education within the strategic documents (Toft, 2011, p. 10).

For analytical purposes, the report formulated twenty-five detailed questions which were addressed during the content analysis of the documents. One of these questions focused on the role of adult education and the availability of lifelong learning in the county education development strategies. The issues of interest were categorised as priorities, operational goals, or tasks, and they addressed detailed matters such as:

- Development of vocational education for adults through:
  - Creating conditions enabling adults to improve their qualifications and acquire a new profession (Bartoszyce);
  - Increasing participation in training and retraining for low-skilled workers, older workers, and those in particularly unfavourable labour market conditions (Busko-Zdrój);
  - Training for low-skilled individuals or working individuals interested in acquiring new skills as well supplementing and improving qualifications and skills (Zamość);
  - Promoting the idea of lifelong learning among employers and employees (Kwidzyn).

- Development of adult education institutions through:
  - Supporting the accreditation of institutions that educate adults (Bartoszyce);
  - Enriching educational offerings and rationalising the network of post-lower secondary schools (Busko-Zdrój);
  - Adapting the offerings of the Centrum Kształcenia Praktycznego i Ustawicznego [Centre for Practical Training and Lifelong Learning] to regional needs in lifelong education (Ełk);
  - Ensuring material, technical, and financial resources for extra-curricular activities and lifelong learning (Gdańsk);
  - Creating a Centrum Kształcenia Ustawicznego [Centre for Lifelong Learning] (Łomża and Tychy);
  - Creating basic conditions for the development of lifelong learning (Opole);
  - Gradually creating conditions for lifelong education based on post-lower secondary schools (Szczecin);
  - Establishing higher education institutions.
- Adapting adult education to the labour market through:
  - Adapting the specialties of post-secondary schools to local labour market needs (Bartoszyce);
  - Promoting, improving quality, and increasing the diversity of lifelong learning programmes, including initiating and supporting educational programmes tailored to demographic trends and labour market needs (Busko-Zdrój);
  - Adapting educational offerings to labour market needs and youth aspirations through labour market analysis of education and training needs, identifying and implementing instruments for aligning vocational education and training with labour market needs, and cooperating with local government bodies, local authorities, institutions, and employers in the development and financing of training and retraining programmes (Kwidzyn);
  - Promoting the importance of lifelong learning and continuously improving professional qualifications and acquiring skills useful in the labour market (Opole);
  - Expanding the offerings of post-secondary and supplementary education for adults and the local labour market (Tychy).

- Supporting individual entrepreneurship through:
  - Organising training in business management and setting up a company (Bochnia).
- Supporting the development of social capital through:
  - Strengthening the role of schools as local centres of culture, lifelong learning, and civic engagement – integrating schools into the implementation of local educational and social policies, including employment (“Open Schools”) (Opole);
  - Improving human resource qualifications and skills (Zamość);
  - Promoting lifelong learning, particularly focusing on qualifications relevant to a knowledge-based economy (Busko-Zdrój).
- Development of formal lifelong education through:
  - Creating conditions for lifelong education development to ensure a smooth education system (Dzierżoniów);
  - Establishing a system to enable lifelong learning for post-lower secondary school graduates in the county, with a particular focus on ensuring a high-quality and stable lifelong learning system (Kartuzy).
- Expanding and modifying adult education formats through:
  - Developing new forms of lifelong learning (Busko-Zdrój);
  - Expanding lifelong learning, including distance education (Przemyśl).
- Improving management in the field of adult education through:
  - Planning and coordinating activities in lifelong education (Szczecin, Łomża);
  - Identifying lifelong learning needs (Przysucha);
  - Rationalising the educational offerings of schools, coordinated at the county level, to meet local needs, including lifelong learning (Łomża) (Toft, 2011, pp. 57–59).

The analysis of the above planning records concerning adult education and lifelong learning in county-level education strategies is relatively extensive. It broadly addresses creating conditions and opportunities for adult education, establishing and planning a lifelong learning system, promoting the concept of lifelong learning, and supporting existing institutions for adult education while creating new ones.

As highlighted by the research results on county-level education strategies presented above, the inclusion of adult education in these documents is significantly more prominent than in municipal education strategies.

However, the primary weaknesses of these documents lie in their generality, which hinders effective monitoring. Priorities, goals, and tasks are often not clearly or logically connected, making their interpretation difficult (Toft, 2011, p. 75).

## **Conclusions**

Adult education is not emphasised in all the municipal and county education development strategies discussed. It is mentioned in less than half of the analysed planning documents. Despite the national education policy highlighting the importance of supporting adult learners, this support is not reflected in education strategies at the municipal or county levels. Another difficult issue is that in most strategies, the importance of lifelong learning is mentioned quite generally, and the priorities, goals, or tasks in this area are not precisely formulated. A major flaw of the education strategies is that they do not refer to any political decisions that would condition the achievement of the goals outlined in them (Toft, 2011, p. 7)

The preliminary analysis of the reports on municipal and county education strategies raises concerns that adult education is not a priority for local government authorities to be reflected in strategic documents. In local communities, education, particularly adult education, must compete with other sectors of socio-economic life. The position of adult education within local communities is largely shaped by local development policies, which are outlined in planning documents such as local development strategies and education strategies. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen local education policies focused on adults, especially at the municipal level, and to clarify strategic objectives in this area at higher levels of local government.

The above conclusions have not changed in light of the updated analysis of the role of adult education in local education strategies. The reviewed planning documents focus almost exclusively on the educational environment for children and youth. Key areas identified for support include the expansion of educational infrastructure and digital transformation, improvement of the teaching staff, strengthening competencies among children and youth in sensitive areas (such as information and communication technologies or emotional and psychological well-being), and the implementation of the principles of accessibility and equality within education. Many strategies highlight the social role of the school,

viewing it as an institution important for the multifaceted development of the local community.

In the context of adult education, an interesting phenomenon observed in recent years is the emergence of development strategies for other sectors where adult education plays a significant role. One can refer to various documents regulating local senior policy (Kraków, Warsaw, Ciechanów, Kęty, and many others) that take the form of senior policy strategies or local senior policy development programmes. These documents are typically created as an interpretation of local social policy but place a strong emphasis on and enhance the educational activities for seniors. Other interesting strategies are those dedicated to sustainable development, where lifelong education is emphasised as a crucial area for enhancing the well-being of the local community. Many cities create separate programmes that support the development of civic education, with adults being significant beneficiaries.

In conclusion, despite the ongoing lack of representation of adult education in local education strategies, there has been a growing interest in this issue in recent years, as reflected in documents supporting the development of other areas of social life. A noteworthy trend among large cities is the creation of comprehensive development strategies, rather than sectoral ones, that encompass overall and multifaceted social development. These strategies take into account the quality of life and well-being of residents, such as the “Kraków Development Strategy. I want to live here. Kraków 2030,” “#Warsaw 2030,” and “Wrocław Strategy 2030.”

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