



Rimantas Želvys

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Prof. Dr. Rimantas Želvys is the author of the book in English „Managing Education in a Period of Change“ (Oslo: ELI Publishing, 1999) and a number of books and academic publications in Lithuanian. His main fields of research are Teacher Training, Education Policy and Management, Education Reforms.

One Hundred Years of Educational Development in Lithuania

Rimantas Želvys, Vilnius University

This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of declaring the independent Republic of Lithuania, and the main focus of our attention is the development of education since 1918, which can be divided into at least four different periods.

1918-1940. The period of building. After declaration of the independence in February 1918, the Ministry of Education was established. After the devastating World War I the Ministry discovered in the territory of the newly founded state 8 functioning gymnaziums (upper secondary schools) and 11 progymnaziums (lower secondary schools) with 360 teachers. Besides that, 1232 teachers worked in primary schools, so the whole teachings corps in the country was 1592 teachers. There were no institutions of higher education as the only university in the country – Vilnius University – was closed down in 1832. The system of education had to be built practically from nothing. Lithuanian university was re-established in 1922. Compulsory primary education – four years – was introduced during the period of 1928-1931. In two decades of intense work the fully-functioning system of education was created and the illiteracy rate in 1940 dropped down to 2 percent.

1940-1944. The period of destruction. The Soviet occupation in 1940 and the World War II had an enormous destructive effect on our educational system. Just in a single day – June 14, 1941 – 11 percent of all Lithuanian teachers were deported to Siberia. Many of the teachers died during the war, perished in exile or fled to the West in fear of repressions when the Red Army was approaching. In 1943 the Nazi German authorities closed down Vilnius University as an act of revenge for non-cooperating with the occupational administration. The system of education met the end of the World War II with demolished schools and few remaining teachers.

1944-1990. The period of adaptation. After the war the country had to adapt to the imposed Soviet model of education. Mass education was one of the essential elements of the model. In 1949 compulsory seven-year education, and in 1958 – compulsory eight-year education was introduced. In 1986 the eleven-years long general secondary education was extended to twelve-years long general secondary education. Massification of general secondary schooling was accompanied by the centralization, monopolization, unification, and, most important, strong ideologization of education.

1990-2018. The period of transformation. There are many challenges facing our education. We have to deal with an ideological challenge – what will substitute the previously imposed communist ideology? Do we accept the new „global ideology“ – neoliberalism – or shall we look for something else? We face a strategic challenge – what are the long-term goals and mission of our education? Do we accept the prevailing outlook that education is a service which has to supply the global labour market with a necessary workforce, or is it something else? We face a structural challenge –due to demographic reasons is shrinking instead of expansion. We came to the the understanding that closing down schools is more difficult than building the new ones. We face the challenge of economical efficiency – how to achieve the desired level of quality and equity in education at the costs which are both available and acceptable to our society? We acknowledge that the current state of our education is far from perfect and that there are still many questions to be answered and many solutions to be found. However, when we look back at the starting position we had one hundred years ago, there is no doubt that we can be really proud with what we have achieved.