

UK Polish Saturday Schools and Civil Society During the Covid-19 Pandemic

ANNE WHITE¹

ORCID: [0000-0002-4431-6707](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4431-6707)

UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

SARA YOUNG

ORCID: [0000-0002-5079-1678](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5079-1678)

UCL Institute of Education

This article continues a theme recently raised in this journal by Małek (2019) and Krzyworzeka-Jeliniowska (2019). It analyses the activism of Polish women living abroad, as headteachers, teachers and parents at Saturday schools, and demonstrates that Polish migrants are not as socially passive as sometimes assumed. We define civil society as ‘a society of active citizens, associating together and working for the collective good’. Our study of seven schools suggests that the Covid-19 lockdown stimulated some schools to broaden their activities as civil society organisations. Although some local links were weakened, for example because Polish Clubs were shut, the schools’ online activities expanded: more networking took place between headteachers UK-wide, and the schools reached out to a range of Polish and non-Polish organisations: locally; elsewhere in the UK; in Poland; and in third countries. Within the schools, the pandemic represented an opportunity to teach children about their civic responsibilities and involve parents more directly in children’s education. However, the lockdown also raised difficulties for all Saturday schools, not just Polish ones, when their credentials as ‘educational’ organisations seemed challenged by both UK government policy and some mainstream schools.

Keywords: Civil society, Saturday schools, Polish migration, transnational activism, Covid-19

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic both depressed and stimulated civil society action in many countries. On the one hand, lockdowns restricted regular activities and hit the finances of NGOs. On the other, 2020 was marked by displays of solidarity and neighbourli-

¹ Contact: anne.white@ucl.ac.uk

ness as well as street protests and new social movements. Saturday schools, Polish and others, had to work hard to maintain their educational functions (Global Future 2021, Young, White 2022). Saturday schools also have social functions, for example as community hubs. Our article discusses how these social functions evolved when schools went online, and, connected to this, the schools' developing relationships with other civil society organisations and with Polish and UK state institutions. Our article argues that to some extent the schools helped strengthen civic action and citizen identities amongst UK-based Poles.

'Civil society' has been defined in diverse ways in the writings of philosophers and political scientists over the centuries (Keane 1988). However, in recent decades it is almost always regarded positively, as a component of democracy. The dominant scholarly framework of analysis, democratisation theory, distinguishes different functions for civil society in the transition to democracy and the subsequent period of democratic consolidation (Gill 2000). The role of embryonic civil society in toppling authoritarian regimes is irrelevant to this article. Within established democracies "the idea of civil society... embodies for many an ethical ideal of the social order, one that, if not overcomes, at least harmonizes, the conflicting demands of individual interest and social good" (Seligman 1992: x). The narrowest definitions confine the term to NGOs with political roles; more often, all NGOs and forms of volunteering are included; wider definitions, more popular today among qualitative scholars, also encompass informal and family networks as well as all kinds of activism (Diamond 1999; Hann 1996). Our own definition is a broad one: 'a society of active citizens, associating together and working for the collective good'. This definition leaves open the possibility for differences of opinion concerning definitions of the 'collective good'. Most democratisation theorists consider that civil society is not part of the state or market, but that it has to engage with both. Its role vis-à-vis the state is often complex and dynamic, particularly during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recent evidence-based literature on Polish civil society argues that it is both livelier and larger than 1990s studies such as Howard (2000) asserted. This is partly because there are more opportunities for activism in 21st century Central Europe, but also because civil society is defined more broadly by many scholars. For example, Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2017: 4) comment on the overlap between domestic and civil society spheres in Poland, while both Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2017) and Foa and Ekiert (2017) highlight the importance of including informal activity under the heading of civil society. Recent authors, starting with Kucharczyk (ed.) (2013), also argue that 21st century Polish migrants are more active than is sometimes assumed, both in pursuit of migrant causes (Garapich 2016) and campaigns for change such as LGBTQ+ rights in Poland (Binnie, Klesse 2013). Elgenius's (2017) study of organisations just in London testifies to the dynamism but also the diversity and potential for conflicts within the Polish migrant civic space.

Polish Saturday schools

Saturday Schools teach Polish language and other subjects, such as history, geography and religion. In the UK, most prepare children for UK state examinations in Polish as a ‘modern foreign language’. There exist more than 200 schools,² of which about 100 were founded after 2004 (White 2017: 242). From an official UK perspective, they are part of a network of complementary schools which either focus on migrant heritage languages or teach subjects in English to children who are disadvantaged in mainstream schools. From the 1970s, the UK Saturday school movement helped black British children achieve educational success and social mobility despite the perceived institutional racism of mainstream schools (Gerrard 2013). From an official Polish perspective, the schools are ‘Polish diaspora’ (in Polish: *Polonia*) organisations.³ They receive some government support, through embassies and through organisations tasked with taking care of Poles abroad, such as *Wspólnota Polska*, an NGO under the auspices of the Polish Senate. Many Saturday schools in Europe, especially in the UK, are linked to the PMS, the *Polska Macierz Szkolna* or Polish Educational Society. This provides pedagogical and organisational support, and led the successful 2015 campaign opposing the abolition of A-level Polish, the UK school-leaving examination.⁴ In London, PUNO, the Polish University Abroad, also provides advice and support.⁵

PMS is only an umbrella organisation and each school runs itself. Hence, when the pandemic arrived, school managements had to decide how to deal with the emergency. When the first UK Covid-19 lockdown was imposed in March 2020, face-to-face teaching ended for most children, and Saturday school premises also closed, with some schools moving online. Although the national lockdown was gradually lifted from June 2020, restrictions were reimposed in the autumn (varying according to geographical area), making it difficult again for Saturday schools to operate. Saturday schools also suffered attrition, with some schools closing and many children dropping out. Up to half of children stopped attending Polish Saturday schools, according to both international and UK data (Podhorecka 2020), although the proportion was lower in the schools we investigated.

Polish Saturday schools have generated a small scholarly literature of their own, but are also discussed by researchers interested more broadly in Polish migrant organisations.

² <https://www.orpeg.pl/db/web/database/115?field%5B1578%5D=Wielka+Brytania&queryString=&dateTo=&dateFrom=&page=1#> [Accessed: 27.07.21]

³ Główny Urząd Statystyczny / Obszary tematyczne / Ludność / Polonia i Polacy w świecie / Baza organizacji i instytucji polskich i polonijnych za granicą [Accessed: 27.07.21]

⁴ <https://polskamacierz.org/> [Accessed: 27.07.21]

⁵ [Polski Uniwersytet Na Obczyźnie w Londynie – The Polish University Abroad in London \(puno.edu.pl\)](http://puno.edu.pl/) [Accessed: 27.07.21]

In *Identity in Flux: The Polish Community in Britain*, Sword (1996: 108–113) presents Saturday schools predominantly as identity-forming organisations. After outlining their history since the 1940s, Sword discusses challenges existing in the 1990s, such as the different linguistic abilities of children from different migrant backgrounds, and shoestring finances. Sword also noted that by the 1990s the UK environment had improved for complementary education, since multiculturalism had become government policy and regular schools were more likely to make their premises available (Sword 1996: 112).

Both Sword and researchers writing about Polish Saturday schools in the 21st century present them as above all local organisations, with individual identities reflecting their history; socio-demographic features of the local Polish population; leadership and involvement from teachers and parents. Their success depends on civil society skills: the hard work, organisational abilities, friendship ties and ingenuity of grassroots activists. Prasałowicz et al (2012: 130–1), in their report on UK Saturday schools, highlight the role of teachers and headteachers in making them function well. Parents, as consumers, can be critical and demanding, as illustrated by the analysis of internet forums in Prasałowicz et al (2012: 107–30). However, parents can also contribute to the schools' success. Prasałowicz et al (2012: 134) claim that “the presence of parents in the life of UK Polish schools is an untouched and until now unappreciated aspect of their functioning”. Writing a few years later, both Małek (2019, on the UK and Italy) and Krzyworzeka-Jelinowska (2019, on France) underline the importance of parental involvement and the benefits to parents of being able to socialise with local Polish people and participate in local community affairs.

Małek (2019) and Krzyworzeka-Jelinowska (2019) highlight the feminised quality of Saturday schools: most teachers and parent activists are women. Małek's article title refers to the activists' perception of themselves as 'strongwomen' (*siłaczki*). Their gender influences their activism in community organisations. “People connect and engage not only in ethnic ways... but also in terms of other social categories” (Anthias 2012: 105). These are not just 'Polish Saturday schools', but also schools run by women, as commonly occurs across the whole Saturday school sector (Burman and Miles 2020: 18).

As mentioned above, Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2017) note the overlap between domestic and civil society activism. Małek (2019: 109) argues that the strongwomen have a sense of responsibility towards the Saturday school collective. This responsibility, for some schools, extends to the mini-community of local Polish families, as White (2017: 189–90) demonstrates in her study of a school in England whose activists helped build a local Polish community where none existed before 2004. Saturday schools organise events like fancy dress parties for adults, summer fêtes and Christmas dinners combined with Nativity plays, which are attended not only by parents, but also by other Poles (White 2017:189). This helps build a certain connectedness

between local Polish people, although in some cases it also leads to friction and fractures within Polish networks.

As Gill (2010) observes in his article about ‘pathologies of migrant place-making’, it is not easy to build diaspora organisations from scratch, especially when there is a prevalent discourse of Poles abroad behaving antagonistically towards one another (Garapich 2012). Małek (2019: 111) comments how some interviewed parents dismissed the perceived cliquy behaviour of Saturday school leaderships as “typically Polish”, although they had no experience of how other nationalities behaved in similar situations. On the other hand, as argued in White (2017: 192) “the fact that new Polish community organisations are being created and running successfully goes some way towards dispelling Polish expectations that Poles abroad will not help each other”. Intersecting with local networks, though also operating online, a dynamic Polish migration industry (Garapich 2008) provides a wealth of advice and support on a commercial basis, although sometimes these are not so much healthy manifestations of civil society but instead ‘sticky’ networks (Słowik 2016), comparable to spiderwebs, which can catch out unwary migrants and offer unreliable advice.

A smaller part of the literature concerns Saturday schools’ relations with the receiving society. As complementary schools, they have to abide by national legislation. They interact with local educational authorities and other services and non-Polish community organisations (White 2017: 190). This links to their role as integrating entities (Małek 2019: 114) although, judging from their websites, only a minority consider this aspect of their identity to be significant (White 2018: 210). Of course, the receiving society is not always welcoming, most obviously in the case of the UK after the Brexit referendum. Mainstream schools are sometimes unwilling to collaborate with Saturday schools, as discussed for example in Zielińska et al (2014: 413–4) with reference to Iceland and the UK, and the Global Future (2021) report on UK Saturday schools of all varieties.

The 2014 Kraków international congress of Saturday school activists revealed a split in viewpoints. On the one hand was the more nationalist attitude that the school’s role was to ‘preserve’ a historically constituted Polish identity and culture. The more liberal approach was that schools should help children become bilingual and prepare them for life as people of Polish origin in receiving societies (White 2018: 209). A section of Saturday school and PUNO activists (represented for example in Zechenter (ed.) (2016) strongly advocates that knowing two languages is good for everyone. In this case one of the languages is Polish, but that is not understood to mean that Saturday school children should display an exclusivist patriotic commitment to Poland. This is a position which sits comfortably with the recognition that many pupils today have only one Polish parent.

These ‘nationalist’ and ‘liberal’ objectives seem to link to different philosophical positions, but in fact they often occur side-by-side in official pronouncements such as Saturday school mission statements, and many parents and teachers are probably

unaware of potential tensions between more conservative and liberal approaches, or different conceptions of citizenship (Polish-more-than-British *versus* Polish-and-British). Nor does scholarly literature on the schools explore this dichotomy. Although all Saturday schools try to help pupils connect with their Polish identity, our article argues that this means different things to different schools, different parents and different pupils, as we illustrate with regard to the schools' activities and links to other organisations during 2020.

Within civil society theoretical literature, there is disagreement about whether activity focusing on national identity should be classed as a welcome display of citizen activism; when 'patriotism' would be better classed as 'nationalism'; and which organisations work 'against' democracy: 'uncivil society', to use Kopecký and Mudde's (2003) phrase. There exists a narrative – dating back to media stories about the far-right connections of three schools in 2018 (Siddique 2018) – that UK Saturday schools are part of uncivil society, even though there is no evidence that these schools were representative of a wider trend. Moreover, in the contemporary Polish context, it can seem uncomfortable to some activists to accept financial support from a Polish government with whose version of patriotism they do not necessarily agree.

All in all, Saturday school heads, teachers and volunteers are exactly the type of family-based civil society activists as mentioned by Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2017) who deserve to be more noticed in studies of Polish civil society abroad. Our study put their activities under the microscope.

Research design and methods

Young's previous research (Young 2018) had focused on ethno-linguistic identities among teenage Poles in the UK. For this project she interviewed, in English, eight headteachers from seven schools of different sizes, across England. Seven interviews were conducted using online platforms and one by email. Three took place in summer 2020 and asked about the first lockdown; the rest were held in November, during the second. As in Małek's sample, the headteachers were almost all women. The same was true of their staff – in fact, in some schools all the teachers and/or volunteers were female. Participants were mostly contacted through snowball sampling, although initially we also approached headteachers directly, using a list of UK Saturday schools. The methodology followed was a series of semi-structured interviews, which allow participants to present their own experiences; this is an appropriate methodology for an exploratory study of this kind. The one participant who chose to respond via email was sent a list of the open-ended questions to be asked during the interview and was invited to expand on each of them. The data collected in this way therefore supplemented the data gathered via the online interviews; his points often reinforced what had been said by other heads.

White analysed the Polish-language websites and public Facebook (FB) pages of the schools up to the end of 2020. The FB pages were complex and detailed, totalling many thousands of words, so they richly complemented the interviews as information sources – including serving as 2nd lockdown ‘sequels’ to the summer interviews. Whereas the interviews presented the headteachers’ perspectives, the FB pages also included contributions by teachers, children and parents and shed light on a range of views and relationships within the schools. The information from our eight schools was supplemented by analysis of the nation-wide FB network of UK Saturday school teachers and ⁶ a November 2020 PMS survey completed by 20 schools across the UK. The analysis was also informed by White experience of weekly participant observation, teaching English to adults at other Saturday schools, from 2009-20. Ethical approval was granted by UCL Institute of Education. All names have been pseudonymised.

The PMS survey backed up our interview findings, showing, for example, that parental involvement had increased in some respects. However, FB evidence also indicated that, when interviewed by Young, most heads had been too modest about their achievements. Of course, eight interviews is not a large sample and FB provides only incomplete evidence of what occurred, especially given that in some schools much communication happened by email. Moreover, the heads who were happy to be interviewed were naturally among the more successful ones, activists who had positive stories to tell. We cannot generate statistics from our own findings or generalise about all UK schools.

Beneficiaries of Saturday school civic activity

Although some schools focus more narrowly than others on their educational tasks, those we researched did display features of civil society organisations: groups of ‘active citizens, associating together and working for the collective good’. The predicament of the pandemic and lockdown helped promote this role. Different ‘collectives’ can be identified as benefiting from their activities. Saturday school teachers do not just teach language but also have a role in moulding children as citizens. Moreover, the Saturday school also has roles to play vis-a-vis the wider society, both local and national, as indicated by the concentric circles in Figure 1. Based on our albeit imperfect evidence about this particular group of schools, links to local Polish organisations were especially vulnerable during the pandemic, while national and school-level community solidarities were somewhat enhanced. Each school had a different profile and some played more active social roles than others.

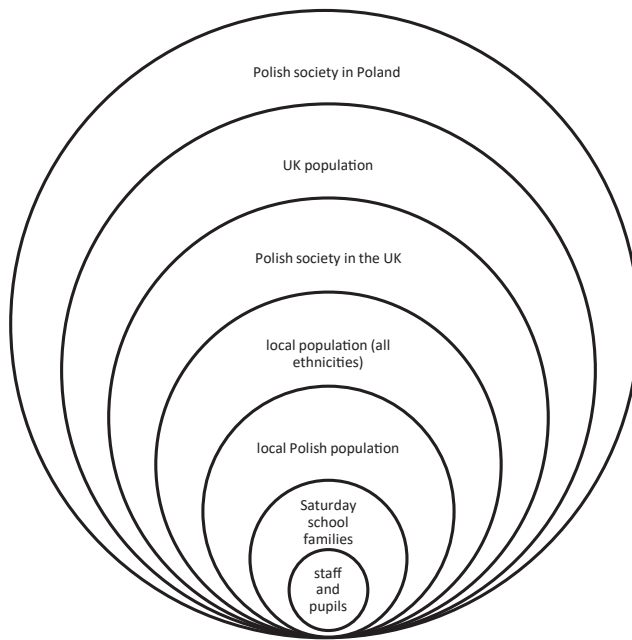
The heads already had a strong stake in their schools, which in some cases they had founded. Magda commented: “I basically put all my heart into it, and this is like

⁶ The (public) FB group is named *Polskie sobotnie szkoły w Wielkiej Brytanii*.

little baby of mine, so I would like to keep it in a good condition". Now the heads had to take on new leadership roles, most importantly in persuading colleagues to transition to online classes, rather than just emailing the children homework, which was the easier option. Some heads also used FB to spread information to teachers and parents about different online Polish language-teaching resources.

Figure 1

Contacts and beneficiaries of UK Saturday Schools



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Heads additionally tried to raise parents' and children's spirits in various ways. In all but one school, FB pages advertised webinars by psychologists and other 'well-being' specialists, such as a practitioner of Chinese medicine, who gave parents advice about how to deal with children's problems. They advertised additional free educational activities such as science lessons and experiments from institutions in both Warsaw and London. Saturday school staff themselves tried to keep the school community cheerful; for example, Dorota wrote and broadcast riddles which were 'liked' by parents on FB. (It was noticeable that almost all 'likes' for Saturday school postings were from women, adding to the impression that mothers were more engaged with the schools' activities than fathers.) During the lockdown, some schools made sure that Facebook was used to show off achievements and homework of individual children to peers and their relatives and friends. Like mainstream schools

and nurseries,⁷ the Saturday schools reached out to parents in new ways in autumn 2020, when some of them returned to face-to-face teaching but for social distancing reasons could not host parents on school premises, especially for celebrations. Youtube videos showing activities such as carol singing brought parents 'into' schools during the period when only the children were allowed to be there. Magda pointed out: "We're going to survive only when we change and we progress, and we're going to [be] proactive."

In their website mission statements, two schools emphasised their role in building local communities. However, others also seem to have had the same aim – recognising the need to create opportunities for Polish families to gather together as mini-communities, for example, through regular before-school assemblies or in the evenings, or to celebrate the end of the school year. However, with the exception of a school which celebrated Constitution Day and another school which marked Independence Day collectively online (including standing for the national anthem), gatherings seemed to be more for emotional support rather than an expression of patriotism. Ewa stated "We wanted parents to know that we care about them".

It is often difficult for voluntary organisations to engage service users as much as they would like, and, as existing literature on Polish Saturday Schools makes plain, activists can feel annoyed by the perceived passivity of many parents. During the first lockdown and to some extent also later parents lost the opportunity to be on Saturday school premises, so they could not carry out their usual roles such as supervising playtime. The big change, however, was that they had to become more involved in teaching. For safeguarding reasons, heads insisted that they be present during lessons. Dorota commented: "Parents were complaining that now they have to do the teacher's job, but we ignored that – or rather, we said, 'We're all in this together now, it's what we have to do'." Some parents found this impossible. As in society at large, the pandemic exacerbated social inequality among Saturday school families, with poorer families and those where parents worked night and/or weekend shifts less able to take on home schooling. However, other parents were more 'present' in the school when it was online than they would be normally. One interviewee reported that parents with poorer English engaged well with homeschooling for Saturday school partly to compensate for their limited ability to provide similar support with learning at the British school.

In ordinary times, other Poles living locally could be invited to Saturday school social events; attend English language classes held at a few schools; or participate in after-school clubs like scouts. At least one school in our sample used to hold celebrations in a Polish club established by post-war refugees, and schools collaborated with other local Polish associations. From the interviews it seemed that these regular Polish community activities were often suspended during lockdown.

⁷ Personal communication from Tamara White, 31.05.2021.

The interviews and FB pages did however highlight forms of engagement with local non-Polish institutions. Interviewees mentioned consulting with local teachers of other minority languages; one head continued to serve on an Ethnic Minority Independent Council; another school posted a home video showing a Polish doctor in a local hospital telling children about looking after Covid patients.

Volunteering is a form of civic engagement promoted by some Saturday schools. In our sample, Olga cited the instance of a 16-year old running an online storytime club for younger children. Pupils were also encouraged to volunteer in activities outside the school, and/or give to charity. In one school, children discussed volunteering on the occasion of International Volunteer Day. In another, they donated to a local foodbank and made Christmas cards to send to people living in care homes in both the UK and Poland. In a third, they helped tidy up the graves of local Polish people and supported a children's home in Poland. Other examples were discussed in the national FB page for Saturday schools, which for instance promoted a campaign to send money and cards to Polish lorry drivers stuck at Dover at Christmas 2020 in the run-up to Brexit.

As these examples show, it can be difficult to separate 'local' from 'national' or even 'transnational' civic engagement. For instance, supporting the National Health Service by displaying paintings of rainbows or clapping healthcare workers on Thursday evenings (as mentioned on FB) could be interpreted as showing solidarity with local healthworkers, but also as a commitment to national and international anti-Covid efforts.

In many small ways, schools in our sample extended their role within Polish society in the UK. They displayed online posters for various non-local cultural activities, as in the case of a provincial school which advertised a Polish literary event at a London library. Another showed a video of Christmas celebrations at POSK, the Polish social and cultural centre in London. Consolidating links between Poles in different parts of the UK also took the form of participating in the informal UK Polish Saturday school movement, networking and providing support for other Saturday schools. Some heads felt that PMS was rather slow to provide guidance for teachers and that this was why horizontal connections strengthened. Olga reported "I made a lot of connections with Heads of other schools, which I didn't have before." Similarly, Weronika commented that "over the last few weeks, I have been to many Directors' meetings of Polish Schools. I have noticed that since lockdown, even from March until July, and now, they are just united, all of the schools, so much. I am amazed how powerful it is."

Operating online also gave opportunities for Saturday schools to extend their transnational ties. Barbara and Magda were running their schools from Poland during the lockdown, so they personified transnational civil society. Links increased to Polish diaspora organisations based in Warsaw and some schools also cultivated their bilateral links to Polish Saturday schools in other countries outside Poland and

UK. Two schools encouraged parents to vote in the crucial second round of the Polish presidential election, when the outcome hung in the balance and the votes of overseas Poles could potentially swing the result.

Evolving relations with the market and (UK) state

Saturday schools are not-for-profit organisations. The commercial market in online language courses was a competitor, drawing away some children from the schools. On the plus side, normally expensive commercial resources were made available for free, such as webinars on wellbeing, yoga classes and visits to the zoo in Poland. The pandemic allowed schools to take advantage of these resources although in some cases they also advertised paid services – propping up the Polish ‘migration industry’, including potentially ‘sticky networks’, but not necessarily promoting civil society.

The pandemic exposed some strengths of existing bridges to the UK state. Our interviews confirmed the findings of the PMS survey (Podhorecka 2020) that, where Saturday schools already enjoyed good relations with the school whose premises they rented, these represented an important asset. Some mainstream schools waived the rent during the months when premises could not be used, and/or allowed the Saturday school to continue using premises after lockdown despite the extra cleaning costs and inconvenience under the new regime. Some interviewees had positive experiences of collaboration with mainstream teachers regarding entering children for Polish-language examinations and (when school examinations were abolished across England) predicting their grades as a substitute for students sitting examinations.

However, already existing tensions between the state and supplementary sector (Kenner and Ruby 2012; Global Report 2021) became heightened during the pandemic. Saturday schools felt under pressure to highlight their mainstream educational roles rather than their civil society identities. In this respect the Polish schools were in a similar position to other UK supplementary schools. During the November lockdown, state schools were allowed to remain open, but most Saturday schools were told to close on the grounds that they were not ‘educational establishments’, but ‘clubs’. To make matters worse, officials were confused at first, with schools receiving contradictory advice from government helplines and having their expectations raised only to be disappointed. Some interviewees were offended, especially in view of their own contribution to boosting the examination results of mainstream schools, under whose auspices children often sat their Polish-language examinations. Weronika, for instance, complained that “Some of the [Saturday School] Directors really feel underestimated by other English school directors: ‘You are a club.’ [...] if it wasn’t for the supplementary schools, there wouldn’t be so many numbers of children passing these exams.”

Some mainstream schools also arbitrarily withdrew supplementary school students from the GCSE and A-level examinations. Mainstream schools could feel that it would be too difficult to organise teacher predictions for students taught in supplementary schools – thereby betraying a lack of confidence in Saturday school teachers' capacities, which some interviewees also shared. As a result, the numbers of examinations 'taken' in 2020 fell across all minority languages, with Polish A-level enrolments cut by 54% (Global Future 2021:14). PMS was able to come to the rescue in some instances, since it supported schools to upgrade from club to educational status, and also allowed candidates to enrol for examinations.

Patriotism and the Polish nation-state

Patriotism can be understood in diverse ways, and no doubt within each team of teachers and each collective of parents and children there existed a range of attitudes towards Polishness, some more consciously patriotic than others. Two schools specifically mention inculcating patriotism as a value on their websites.

Links to Poles outside the UK can be simply ties between the UK schools and partner institutions in other EU countries, with whom, for example, schools jointly celebrated Polish Bilingual Day. However, more often their links with international Polish diaspora organisations took the form of participation in events such as linguistic, cultural or historical competitions organised in Warsaw. In these situations, they were often participating in activities sanctioned and promoted by the *state*, i.e. the nationalist Polish government. Most schools mentioned their financial support from Polish state, generally to cover costs of renting premises, and one school published a letter congratulating them on Polish Heritage Day from figures in the Senate (the parliamentary chamber which has official oversight of Polonia). Most schools also published one or two letters from Arkady Rzegocki, UK Polish Ambassador, who often sent communications to Saturday Schools; curiously, each school published letters on the occasion of different commemorative days. One school, by some indicators among the most patriotic in the sample and especially well-connected with official UK and Poland-based Polish diaspora institutions, hosted its own online meeting with the Ambassador.

Most schools marked national holidays – although generally just with special classes and artwork, or occasionally also videos of poetry readings by the children which were posted on FB. Generally the content was fairly conventional; exceptions included one child's drawing of flags from many countries, not just Poland, on Polish Flag Day (2 May). These celebrations have to be seen in the context of some schools marking numerous other 'days', often international in character, which gave a structure to the school year in ordinary times but which could sometimes be celebrated more interestingly with online materials.

Possibly some schools ended 2020 feeling more connected to Polish state and state-connected institutions which had tried to support them during the pandemic. However, they remained autonomous organisations, not arms of the Polish state. Connections to the state did not invalidate their civil society status.

Conclusions

Although Polish Saturday Schools share common features, for example the fact that they depend on a collective of women activists, each is unique in numerous respects, in terms of its history, leadership, aims, socio-demographic characteristics of pupils, etc. This uniqueness was evident before the pandemic, but the pandemic added to the unique configuration of features constituting each school's identity. During lockdown each school developed a particular network of relations with other organisations and social groups, which it supported or on which it drew for support. Lockdown strengthened the schools' civil society roles and links, promoting for example heads' leadership skills; solidarity between school and parents, to some extent; and informal horizontal networks of headteachers. Lockdown hampered some traditional forms of local Polish community collaboration, but offered new opportunities to connect with Poles across the UK, in Poland and in third countries, as well as supporting non-Polish UK institutions. A good example would be the school which – at a time when carehomes were at the forefront of public attention – sent Christmas cards to residents in a local UK carehome as well as one in Poland.

Transnational activities included more engagement with Polish state or state-sponsored organisations, although this should not be understood as necessarily promoting a more socially conservative and state-supportive stance on the part of schools and parents. Relations with the UK state also became considerably more significant, since schools needed official recognition as offering high quality preparation for mainstream examinations and being more than just 'clubs'.

Structural problems – outlined already by Sword in 1996 – could appear insurmountable during the pandemic. These include dependence on local state schools for premises and the schools' reliance in almost all other matters on their own resources. Barbara's sad comment that "We felt abandoned at times, especially in this second lockdown" no doubt reflects the mood of many. The strongwomen's successes came at the cost of enormous effort, and problems and shortcomings should not be disregarded. However, new sources of solidarity emerged, and new resources and allies were discovered. Overall, therefore, it is possible to argue that civil society was strengthened, and that the pandemic demonstrated the accuracy of assessments by other scholars such as Kucharczyk and Garapich who have recently been highlighting the existence of social activism among Polish migrants in the UK.

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