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Educational ideas within the Peasant Movement in the early 20th century: Three engaged voices

Submitted: 30.12.2024

Accepted: 29.10.2025

Published: 31.12.2025



Keywords:

educational thought of
the peasant movement;
rural education;
Stanisław Thugutt
(1873–1941);
Juliusz Poniąkowski
(1886–1975);
Ignacy Solarz
(1891–1940)

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this paper is to present the key ideas and proposals for educational work that emerged within the Polish peasant movement in the first half of the 20th century. It examines the principal educational and upbringing concepts advanced during this period by three prominent peasant movement activists: Stanisław Thugutt, Juliusz Poniąkowski, and Ignacy Solarz. The basic research problem considered in the article is the question of which pedagogical achievements of these three activists can be considered timeless and valuable today.

Research methods: The study mainly makes use of original publications by the selected peasant-movement activists, as well as the methodological assumptions of the social history of education.

Process of argumentation: Based on an analysis of the collected source material, an attempt was made to identify the most important educational ideas proposed by each of the three rural educators.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: In total, twelve educational ideas and proposals formulated by Thugutt, Poniąkowski, and Solarz are identified, many of which may be regarded as timeless and still relevant today.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The author argues that the pedagogical achievements of Thugutt, Poniąkowski, and Solarz should be recognized as an important illustration of Polish contributions to the New Education Movement and considered a valuable and still relevant component of Polish educational heritage.

Introduction

The views of Polish activists of the peasant movement during the first half of the 20th century offer inspiration for organizing many aspects of contemporary social life. Many of these activists also advanced influential ideas on education, and some had the opportunity to put their educational concepts into practice. Among them were Stanisław Thugutt (1873–1941), Juliusz Poniatowski (1886–1975), and Ignacy Solarz (1891–1940). Each was driven by a desire to improve the cultural and economic conditions of rural Poland (and beyond) through extensive educational initiatives. Although their visions for achieving this goal differed, all three recognized education as a priority for the socio-economic development of the entire country. The purpose of this paper is not to present or evaluate the entirety of the educational contributions made by these prominent figures of the peasant movement. Rather, its more modest goal is to identify those aspects of the educational ideas and practical suggestions of Thugutt, Poniatowski, and Solarz that can today be regarded not merely as interesting yet limited historical proposals for rural education, but as an important part of Poland's national educational heritage, worthy of broad recognition for their universal significance.

Stanisław Thugutt (1873–1941) – a politician with an interest in education

The educational views of Stanisław Thugutt, now largely forgotten, are particularly interesting and worthy of wider dissemination today due to their contemporary relevance. Even after World War II, Thugutt was regarded by peasant movement activists as one of the foremost leaders of the interwar period. In the ensuing decades of the Polish People's Republic, however, his role was marginalized, and, knowledge of his political, social, and educational ideas gradually diminished. Nevertheless, these ideas merit closer examination.

a) (Inter)regional education as “building Poland from the ground up”

Stanisław Thugutt was one of the educators who had a significant impact on shaping domestic concepts of regional and patriotic education, as well as on the development of the Polish tourist and sightseeing movement. His work in the *Polskie Towarzystwo Krajoznawcze* (Polish Sightseeing Society), established in 1906, and as editor of its periodical *Ziemia* (Land), founded in 1910, positions him among the key precursors in these fields in Poland. A review of his sightseeing writings, published even before World War I, confirms the enduring value of Thugutt’s contributions in this area (Marcinkowska, 2006).

It is particularly noteworthy that he emphasized the importance of educational efforts related to learning about one’s region and country, because “different parts [of Poland] today present an infinite richness of shades and contrasts” (Boruta, 1911).¹ Another idea, highly relevant today, reads:

We are not the owners of these things but merely their custodians, and we should pass them on to our successors in as good, if not better, condition as we received them from our ancestors (Boruta, 1910).

As these quotations show, it would be worthwhile today to remind society of Thugutt’s views on sightseeing and related matters. At present, he remains almost entirely unknown among educators specializing in regional studies, patriotic education, or intercultural education, specialists who are largely responsible for providing regional education to young Poles. Why, then, should they rely primarily on foreign models? Poland itself has a rich domestic legacy in this area, exemplified by the works of Thugutt from the early 20th century.

b) Education for grassroots social self-organization

Thugutt devoted considerable attention in his work to popularizing and developing the Polish cooperative movement. In the 1930s, he was

¹ All quotations in this paper are the author’s own translations.

an active member and president of the *Towarzystwo Kooperatystów* (Co-operative Society) and also directed the *Spółdzielczy Instytut Naukowy* (Cooperative Scientific Institute). Among his educational initiatives, it seems that only his endeavors in education for cooperativism and the promotion of the cooperative movement are relatively well known (see e.g., Maliszewski, 2010a, pp. 111–126). He regarded these activities not only as an opportunity to effectively raise the standard of living of economically disadvantaged communities, initially in the Polish countryside and later among other social groups and classes, but also an important instrument for building democracy and civil society (see e.g., Thugutt, 1934).

Thugutt's views on education for cooperativism remain highly relevant today, as they promote grassroots self-organization in local communities and society as a whole, while emphasizing the importance of community life. They are undoubtedly worthy of further dissemination.

c) Self-education as a path to personal agency

Thugutt was also a strong advocate of self-education. In the last years of his life, he was regarded as one of the main mentors and educators of rural youth during the interwar period, which made his contemporary proposals in the field of educational practice highly significant socially. It was precisely through his pamphlet *Listy do Młodego Przyjaciela* (Letters to a Young Friend), which promoted the idea of self-education, that almost an entire generation of young Polish peasants was shaped. The significance of *Letters...* in the 1930s and immediately after the war was so great that the booklet came to be known as the “catechism of rural youth.” The publication functioned as a kind of educational guide addressed to young villagers (Thugutt, 1st ed.: 1929; 2nd ed.: 1939; 3rd ed.: 1944; 4th ed.: 1946; 5th ed.: 2002), although many of its recommendations could just as well be applied beyond rural communities. The author emphasized the guidebook-like character of the entire work in the foreword. He also noted that the addressees of his *Letters...* could include all those “who have already gained some education, but who do not quite know what to do with this treasure [...], [for] the young fighter

feels lonely and abandoned, lost among a thousand paths, not knowing which one leads to the goal" (Thugutt, 2002, p. 9).

Let us therefore devote somewhat more attention to *Letters...* and attempt to recall its most important guidelines.

Letter I: Learn so that you will not be a beast of burden, but a conscious creator of a new life.

Stanisław Thugutt, relying largely on the concept of self-education, makes the following appeal: "to learn means to understand what is happening around you and when things go badly, to find an effective remedy for the ailment" (p. 12). The author does not stop at this general appeal but goes on to provide specific guidance: what should one learn, and why? He emphasizes two main points:

Learn as a farmer. Learn no less diligently as a citizen [...] No one will give you advice for free; it is best to manage on your own. You want to be a steward of Poland. Rightly so, but you must know all her pains, worries, and needs (p. 13).

Thus, as one can see, civic education for Thugutt is no less important than vocational education.

Letter II: Organize yourself so that you are not a heap of loose sand, but a dam against the storm.

In the next letter, Thugutt includes an appeal for the self-organization of local communities. Only the unification of a group of people around a common idea or cause allows its weaker members to express their opinions in a way that others must take seriously. He also teaches elements of social group interaction, such as the ability to engage in discussion and to persuade others in public debate.

By advocating the independent organization of members of the local community, he calls for building that community through its own efforts (p. 14). It is worth noting that the slogan "building Poland from the ground up" appears repeatedly in Thugutt's writings (Thugutt, 1984, p. 73).

He does not, however, promise easy success, because “one must awaken the blind and the deaf, fight against selfishness and abuse” (Thugutt, 2002, p. 15), and he urges: “shout aloud, fearing nothing, for the truth is on your side” (p. 15).

Letter III: Let money be your servant, not your master.

Thugutt encourages finding effective ways to improve one’s own wealth, while emphasizing that accumulating property must not become the ultimate goal in life. He writes in the first paragraph of the third letter, “I will not urge you to remain in poverty [...]. On the contrary, I advise you—acquire wealth” (Thugutt, 2002, p. 18). He then explains that prosperity can be achieved through greed or through justice, and he clearly supports the latter method (pp. 19–20).

Letter IV: Be yourself and have faith in yourself.

The guiding idea of the fourth letter is Thugutt’s call to be oneself and not to seek the approval of others: to trust in one’s own strength and to maintain hope for success, both personal and for the entire community: “Therefore I tell you: go alone, looking to no one [...]. Purify your soul from all mold, from bad memories of slavery and decline; purify it until you reach the water that gives life, the healthy and pure [...] strength” (p. 23).

Letter V: Be good and just, and never cease fighting evil.

According to Thugutt, goodness and justice can be realized only through interaction with others: “To be truly good means to wish good for all. Whoever is good has eyes and ears, and above all a heart constantly open to all suffering and misery” (p. 24). He further adds, “If there were no people in the world who [...] fight for justice and cannot tolerate injustice, this whole world would long ago have rotted like carrion” (p. 25).

Letter VI: Be courageous, for your path is long.

Stanisław Thugutt also calls for perseverance and resilience in the face of life’s adversities. He warns, however, that it is all too easy to be misled by an illusory sense of strength:

At times it may seem to you that victory is easy and certain. [...] Who could stand against you? And yet you are both right and mistaken. There is in you a truly unconquerable power, but when it comes to action, you yourself know how unpracticed that power still is (p. 27).

Letter VII: Never forget Poland.

The entire collection of *Letters*... concludes with a call to remember the homeland unceasingly, an impassioned encouragement to cultivate deep patriotism. Thugutt writes, among other things: "This is your home—do not destroy it. [...] Do not lose faith in Poland, for beyond Poland there is nothing for you" (pp. 29–30). For Thugutt, this appeal to cultivate patriotism within oneself and others is closely linked to the injunction to serve Poland with one's whole life, without regard for personal gain (p. 30).

There is no doubt that the recommendations contained in *Letters to a Young Friend* could just as well define the aims and directions of self-improvement for people today. Their remarkable freshness makes them worth revisiting. As the above remarks show, Stanisław Thugutt's educational views in the three highlighted areas have not lost their relevance. Even today, his ideas deserve to be recognized as both timely and socially significant.

Juliusz Poniatowski (1886–1975) – politician and educator

Juliusz Poniatowski was not only a politician but also a social activist, scholar, and educator. In the field of educational studies, however, his educational views remain almost entirely unknown. Today, he is mentioned in textbooks on the history of education primarily as the curator of the elite Krzemieniec Lyceum in Volhynia, which he directed between 1927 and 1934 (Maliszewski, 2010b, pp. 294–311; Szmyt & Stroiński, eds., 2015). Yet his educational legacy is richer and more valuable. He addressed numerous educational issues affecting rural inhabitants, such as agricultural schools, problems of agricultural training, folk high schools, rural libraries, and more. At the same time, many of the problems that he engaged with

extended well beyond the rural sphere. His reflections on the modern school, for instance, were shaped over the years by three distinct contexts: the Second Polish Republic, when, as a politician, he sought to develop schooling and out-of-school education in rural areas; Western Europe, where he remained after the war, observing local school reforms; and the Polish People's Republic, to which he returned in order to pursue academic and educational work related to the modernization of agriculture. Drawing on these broad experiences, Poniowski formulated educational ideas that were unique among Polish educators of his time. He was able to discern then what many would only recognize years later.

Let us now turn to those of Poniowski's reflections on the school that retain universal significance.

a) The school as an institution "perfecting continuity"

Poniowski repeatedly emphasized that the school is a component of its social environment. For this reason, it should serve the community in which it operates, drawing on the natural strengths and capacities of that local setting. He also stressed that the school is a dynamic institution, undergoing constant transformation, since at every stage of social development, it is necessary to seek optimal solutions suited to the needs of the time (Poniowski, 1985, p. 183).

He also cautioned against making overly abrupt changes when modernizing the education system, arguing that school reforms should be carried out gradually and consistently in accordance with a coherent, carefully thought-out plan. The guiding principle for reform practice should be "perfecting continuity!" (Hermaszewski, 1977, p. 44), because, as he explained, "if a bad school is ineffective, this does not at all mean that the school as such is a bad instrument" (Poniowski, 1963). Changes should be made toward ensuring that the school once again becomes "a school in the service of life" (Poniowski, 1931, pp. 3–4). It is important to note that he applied this principle both to the modernization of individual schools and to broader, systemic reforms.

As he further emphasized, the most effective schools are those that, while perfecting continuity, do not forget their social mission. They should

be capable of collaborating with the local community, including families, and of undertaking the task of organizing out-of-school education within that community. As he observed, “influence on adult society, beyond the youth, must be treated as an absolute obligation” (Poniatowski, 1931, p. 6).

b) The necessity of skillfully linking theory with practice

Today, much attention in discussions among educators and policy-makers about the condition of the modern school is devoted to shifting the focus of curricula toward the practical application of knowledge acquired in school. Juliusz Poniatowski, an early advocate of such change, proposed similar ideas decades ago: “Requirements have increased, and the time when the simple transmission of accumulated knowledge and tradition was the main goal of the school has passed. Today, goals have multiplied, and conflicts among them are apparent” (Poniatowski, 1985, p. 181).

His approach to the tasks of the modern school was undoubtedly shaped by his connections with rural areas and agricultural education. Viewing educational issues from the perspective of the countryside, where the need for practical orientation in educational processes was far more evident than elsewhere, led him to important generalizations. His students recalled this, writing, “Everywhere, where, unlike the mass processing of inert material, there is a need to treat each unique and unrepeatable case individually, the preference for actions in the style of ‘unity of mind and hand’ is natural” (Górecki & Groszyński, 1985, p. 19).

This was a clear advocacy for skillfully linking theory with practice, limiting the school’s role as a repository of encyclopedic knowledge, and promoting knowledge and skills with practical application in both professional work and social life.

c) Individualization of the approach to each pupil

In describing the student as a “unique, unrepeatable case,” Juliusz Poniatowski advocated for individualized approaches to education, positioning himself as one of the precursors of an idea that remains highly relevant in contemporary educational reforms and debates. Polish society and the state, concerned with the development of their citizens,

should undertake the education of citizens “on the whole front.” Any narrowing of this activity diminishes its chances [...]. Every ambitious nation that refuses to be relegated to the role of imitator of others’ achievements, seeking to avoid the position of a poor relative and to participate in creating values of universal human culture, strives not to lose its “pearls.” [For] the emergence of exceptional abilities is the result of a very diverse combination of factors and often occurs contrary to expectations. (Poniatowski, 1962, p. 75)

Everyone should be given a chance, and no society should allow itself to neglect the search for and development of talents. To bring out the most valuable qualities in each pupil, one must approach each individual separately. Such far-reaching empowerment, supported by a carefully selected curriculum, teaching methods, and educational activities, provides an opportunity to prepare students for adult life as “complete individuals,” open to the future and to others, and adaptable in a changing labor market. Importantly, “the essence of the school’s achievement is [also] to ensure that the student wants and knows how to continue learning” (Poniatowski, 1985, p. 75).

d) The teacher feeling “the anxiety of continuous improvement”

Particularly interesting and strikingly relevant today are Poniatowski’s views on the teacher. They may be considered among the most compelling pedeutological concepts in the history of twentieth-century Polish educational thought. He repeatedly emphasized the need to care for the condition of Polish teachers, as they are largely the guarantors of a good school: “The teaching staff must naturally constitute the primary concern in preparing any school reform” (Poniatowski, 1985, p. 139). According to his proposals, the teaching staff of every school should consist exclusively of teachers who are creatively active, well-educated, and socially engaged, for “we have a deep contempt for preachy justifications of idleness and fear of risk” (Poniatowski, 1943, pp. 32–33).

He acknowledged the economic constraints of the teaching profession and regretted that insufficient financial resources are all too often used as an excuse for a lack of motivation for self-improvement, which,

in turn, contributes to the poor condition of the profession. Yet it is every teacher's duty to enhance their qualifications. According to Poniatowski, each teacher, regardless of circumstances, must "feel the anxiety of continuous improvement" (Hermaszewski, 1977, p. 44).

These elements outline a framework for school education that remains remarkably relevant today. Despite being largely forgotten by contemporary scholars, Poniatowski recognized these principles decades ago. In the context of modern Polish debates on shaping the contemporary school, it is worthwhile to recall, even briefly, his figure and the most important educational ideas that he promoted. Among them, we may find inspiration for our own reflections and initiatives.

Concluding remarks on Poniatowski's concept of the modern school should note that he viewed the school as one element of a broader educational system: important, but not the only one. He emphasized that a modern society requires coordinated actions by multiple educational actors to fully utilize opportunities for optimal development (Poniatowski, 1985, p. 184).

Ignacy Solarz (1891–1940) – an educator with an interest in politics

The educational views of Ignacy Solarz, particularly his reflections on the place and role of folk high schools in educating rural Polish youth, are the best known among those discussed in this paper. This is not the place to examine them in detail, as readers may consult the extensive literature on the subject. Instead, this paper highlights only a few elements of his educational thought that remain inspiring from a pedagogical perspective, even today (see, e.g., Nowicki, 1947, pp. 10–14; Turos, 1983; Maliszewski, 2023, pp. 63–80).

a) Full participation in civil society as the goal of education

This postulate, strikingly relevant today, was most fully articulated by Ignacy Solarz in a kind of educational manifesto, *Wiejski Uniwersytet*

Orkanowy (The Rural High School named after Orkan), published by the Instytut Oświaty Dorosłych (Warsaw Institute for Adult Education) in the second half of the 1930s. Already on the very first page of this work, there appears a statement that may be regarded as the credo of his entire educational work:

To bring the rural masses into an active and leading creative role in history. From the “social groundwork” to transform them into a personal, self-reliant force in every field of culture. To cultivate within the rural masses the ability to realize a mature, highly ethical, resourceful democracy (Solarz, 1937, p. 1).

This may be regarded as an early prototype of today’s highly relevant idea of empowering all members of society as citizens. Indeed, numerous Polish (and international) works in the social sciences contain similar demands, and many distinguished educators, sociologists, philosophers, and political scientists have articulated related ideas. Why, then, should we not acknowledge today that one of the precursors of this socially powerful and still relevant concept of building civil society was none other than Ignacy Solarz and that his call for “education towards the realization of a mature, highly ethical, resourceful democracy” remains a profoundly significant social postulate, even in the twenty-first century?

b) Being an educator as passion and vocation

The ancient Greek principle that one must remain faithful to one’s declared convictions, regardless of the consequences, ought to be constantly affirmed through the life choices of any educator animated by genuine passion. Today, it seems that too many educators and teachers forget this demanding rule. Yet it is precisely this principle that should once again be incorporated into the educational canon of our time. This was exactly how Solarz conducted his educational work several decades ago. One extant description of this outstanding peasant movement educator captures his personal (and educational) stance with striking accuracy:

At the head of a modest high school, hidden away in a remote village, stands an educator, thinker, and poet who, through commands born of deep reflection on the fate of humanity, creates a type of worker striving to transform himself, his people, his nation, and humanity. Word and deed united in daily toil. (Wiktor, 1983, p. 370)

Many similar testimonies could be cited. Yet if we agree on the need to reintroduce into the world of education the principle of consistency between declared ideals and lived practice, then, alongside figures such as Comenius and Pestalozzi, and in the Polish tradition, Janusz Korczak and Maria Grzegorzewska, we should also recall and more widely disseminate the figure of Ignacy Solarz. His life consistently demonstrates that to be an educator is, above all, to embody an irrepressible passion for action: it is a vocation.

c) Full empowerment of the pupil as an inalienable principle of educational practice

As many authors emphasize, a key attribute of Ignacy Solarz's educational thought was the full partnership between pupil and teacher (Stopińska-Pajak, 2010, p. 19). For Solarz, dialogue, student self-government, shared decision-making on the curriculum, the incorporation of cooperative practices, and the collective organization of daily life (dormitory, meals, housekeeping, etc.) were all constitutive of this empowerment. His educational concepts, which sought to empower all participants in the educational process, represent a methodological approach that extends far beyond the folk high schools which he successively directed in Szyce near Kraków and in Gać Przeworska. Their significance is universal.

d) Cooperation between the educational institution and the social environment as a duty

A particularly strong theme in Ignacy Solarz's thought was his insistence that every educational institution be rooted in the local community in which it operates through the development of a wide range of social connections. A creative and innovative educational institution must

cooperate with its immediate (and broader) social environment not only to demonstrate its social usefulness, but also to cultivate in its pupils a sense of civic engagement and responsibility for their local communities. As Solarz emphasized, an educational institution “must be rooted [...] not only in the life of the entire country, but also in that of the nearest neighborhood” ([Solarz], n.d., p. 1).

Today, when cooperation between educational institutions and their social environments has become one of the central principles of educational theory and practice, it is worth recalling that we also have valuable Polish models in this regard. Solarz’s concept of community-based work deserves broader recognition in educational circles.

e) Creative use of the global educational heritage as a value

The last, though by no means least important, aspect of Solarz’s educational thought that deserves attention is his ability to creatively engage with the educational achievements of other nations. His concept of the folk high school was, in fact, a creative adaptation of the “School for Life” idea developed by the Nordic thinker Nikolai Grundtvig. At the same time, the institution that he created was neither a simple nor an uncritical borrowing of Scandinavian models, nor an attempt to implement them rigidly in the social realities of the Polish countryside. It must be stressed that his reception of Nordic models was only the first step in developing an educational formula suited to the needs of the Polish people. That formula had to be adapted to respond to the specific educational requirements of the community to which it was addressed. Solarz was fully aware of this. His approach to incorporating foreign educational innovations may rightly be regarded as exemplary (Solarzowa, 1985, p. 249).

The few ideas outlined above from Solarz’s educational work demonstrate that he—like the two figures previously discussed in this study—can provide contemporary educators with a wide range of insights: from shaping the ideological inspirations and organizational-methodological foundations of educational institutions to designing their internal functioning and defining their relations with the surrounding community.

Conclusions

In the foregoing discussion, admittedly selective, twelve areas of educational and upbringing concern have been drawn from the views of three prominent Polish figures of the past: Stanisław Thugutt—a politician with an educational inclination; Juliusz Poniatowski—a politician and educator; and Ignacy Solarz—an educator with a political inclination. The first emphasized self-organization, self-education, and learning through everyday life experiences, that is, informal education. The second promoted schools and vocational training institutions (particularly agricultural ones), thereby focusing on the improvement of formal education. The third developed original concepts of the folk high school and youth associations, that is, non-formal education.

Taken together, the educational views of these three leading peasant movement activists reveal the extraordinary contemporary relevance of educational concepts formulated many decades ago. Many historians of education and educators will recognize in their writings and practical educational initiatives an effort to challenge the still-dominant post-Herbartian educational order of their time. In this context, Thugutt, Poniatowski, and Solarz may appear to today's readers, alongside such towering educational figures as John Dewey, Célestin Freinet, Ellen Key, Maria Montessori, and Helen Parkhurst, as Polish representatives of the ideologically rich reformist current in early twentieth-century education: the New Education Movement.

It seems likely that deeper explorations of the Polish educational heritage from earlier historical periods will continue to yield new and inspiring "discoveries," particularly if we, as educators and historians of education, succeed in moving beyond the familiar, almost canonical sets of figures and texts from the past. As the educational sciences continue to seek grounding in history, it is also worth considering the educational ideas that emerged within the broadly understood Polish peasant movement (see the views of the figures discussed here). Both educational theorists and practitioners, whether concerned with modern visions of formal education, non-formal education, or self-education, will surely find in such "discoveries" a wealth of inspiration for shaping their own educational concepts and practices.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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