



URSZULA DERNOWSKA<sup>1</sup>  
The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw  
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2839-1077

## MISSION STATEMENTS AS A BASIS FOR REFLECTION ON THE PRIORITIES OF THE GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOL<sup>2</sup>

Abstract

The article provides an analysis of general secondary school mission statements of 53 schools from the public sector in Warsaw. The purpose of the study was to gain a perspective on the school's priorities as defined by secondary schools themselves. The qualitative content analysis revealed that mission statements highlight the broad range of goals that the schools pursue. Some of these goals may be thought of in terms of educational results, while others may be seen as educational "inputs". The obtained results show that schools share certain priorities, but there was also a range of "specific" objectives that the educational institutions pursue.

**Keywords:** the purpose of school, school mission statements, general secondary school, qualitative content analysis

## MISJA SZKOŁY JAKO PODSTAWA REFLEKSJI O PRIORYTETACH LICEUM OGÓLNOKSZTAŁCĄCEGO

Abstrakt

W artykule przedmiotem analizy uczyniono misje 53 publicznych liceów ogólnokształcących zlokalizowanych w Warszawie. Celem badań było ustalenie, jak szkoły definiują swoje priorytety. Na podstawie jakościowej analizy treści misji badanych instytucji ustalono, że szkoły deklarują orientację na różnorodne cele: zarówno te opisujące oczekiwane efekty kształcenia, jak i te związane z charakterystyką środowiska instytucjonalnego szkoły. Zaprezentowane wyniki pozwalają dostrzec specyfikę misji badanych szkół, mimo pewnych podobieństw w definiowaniu przez nie swoich priorytetów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cel szkoły, misja szkoły, liceum ogólnokształcące, jakościowa analiza treści

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<sup>1</sup> Urszula Dernowska, PhD, assistant professor, Institute of Pedagogy, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw, Poland. Main research interests: the problems of interactive conditions of education, scaffolded instruction, school culture, the school mission statement. E-mail: [udernowska@aps.edu.pl](mailto:udernowska@aps.edu.pl).

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## INTRODUCTION

For some time now, many pedagogical studies have been focused on comparing schools based mostly on educational outcomes (e.g. Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore 1982; Lubienski and Lubienski 2006). Such an approach seems to stem from the assumption that schools are homogeneous as far as their overall purpose is concerned. However, as early as in the Antiquity, philosophers concerned with education considered different goals of school. For example, Plato, Aristotle or Confucius wrote about the purpose of schooling in their respective cultures (Noddings 1995). Over the following centuries, the debate on the meaning and aims of education was still ongoing with participation of such great thinkers as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel or Dewey, to name only a few.

The purpose of schooling is still very much a relevant issue, and the notion of school mission statement is analyzed from various points of view: academic, legislative, legal, entrepreneurial, international, and institutional (Stemler and Bebell 2012; Stemler and DePascale 2016). Theorists, researchers and policy makers, as well as the general public, all recognize that schooling has multiple purposes. However, there exists little empirical work examining the viewpoint of the school itself on its priorities. Such research may be particularly necessary in Poland, as there are currently very few studies exploring the issue of the mission statement. These studies, however, have generally been conducted as part of projects concerning the organizational culture of schools, rather than aimed at a systematic and in-depth exploration of the values, objectives, and tasks of the school as an institution (e.g. Polak 2007).

This paper reports on the empirical data collected in a research project with a twofold objective: (1) gain a perspective on the school's priorities as defined by secondary schools themselves; (2) understand how school principals perceive and interpret the mission of their school. The aim of this article is to present the results of the study to show how the sampled public general secondary schools define their own role and purpose themselves.

The article consists of two main parts. The first concerns the notion of the mission statement as an important summation of the priorities of an institution. Examples of previous empirical studies on this issue are presented. My research project focused on the mission statements of general secondary schools. For this reason, the purpose of secondary education is also discussed. In the second part, both methodological background and the results of my study are discussed.

### 1. THE NOTION OF MISSION STATEMENT

Interest in mission statements has significantly increased on a global scale in the past 25 years. Their overall significance has been studied in numerous areas in both profit and non-profit organizations (e.g. Khalifa 2012). In the literature on management, various definitions of the concept of mission statement as well as various

benefits of having a mission statement can be found (Alegre et al. 2018). For example, Ekpe states that a mission statement is a brief and formalized document intended to distil an organization's purpose, values and function (Ekpe, Eneh and Inyang 2015, 135). It is a declaration of an organization's "reason for being" and distinguishes one organization from other similar enterprises (David, David and David 2014, 96-98). It is a set of long-term goals and objectives of the organization giving direction to the work of its members. It is a "self-definition" of the organization through answering the questions: "why does the organization exist?", "what is its purpose?", "whose and what kind of needs should it satisfy?", or "what is its social mission?" (Piotrowski 2000, 759).

Based on a review of the literature, it can be concluded that the process of articulating an organization's mission has at least two potential benefits: instructional and motivational. The first concerns the members of the organization. A clear mission helps them distinguish between decisions and activities that do and those that do not conform to the institutional priorities. Another benefit derived from a mission statement is a shared sense of purpose and a set of common values. It can inspire and motivate people within the organization and to communicate its characteristics, objectives, values, and history to key external entities (Morphew and Hartley 2006, 457).

It is worth adding that over the past decade, mission statements have become an increasingly popular management tool (e.g. Cardona and Rey 2008). Some researchers point to the value of mission statements in expressing a vision for an organization's future. Others stress that mission statements play numerous roles in an organization's present and future situation (e.g. Williams 2008). A clear definition of the purpose of an organization enables it to survive and develop.

However, many scholars and practitioners see – as Morphew and Hartley put it – "the mission statement glass as half-empty" (2006, 457). In line with this approach, mission statements are considered a "collection of stock phrases that are either excessively vague or unrealistically aspiration or both. From this perspective, mission statements ultimately fail to follow through on or convey any noteworthy sense of an institution's current identity" (Morphew and Hartley 2006, 457). Others, in turn, emphasize that a mission statement is made effective and real only when it is formulated jointly by the representatives of all stakeholders and when it serves as a guidance (e.g. Sufi and Lyons 2003).

The mission statement was adopted by schools from the corporate sector. Simply speaking, it specifies why a school exists, and what its fundamental purpose is (Gurley et al. 2015). For Boerema (2006), the mission statement of a school actually articulates a set of values that answer fundamental questions about the purpose of education. It provides context for governance, decision making, and the way the school is managed.

According to Stemler and DePascale (2016, 60), "mission statements represent an important summation or distillation of an organization's core goals represented by concise and simple statements that communicate broad themes. Furthermore,

school mission statements are one of the only written documents outlining purpose that nearly all schools have". Therefore, school mission statements may be viewed as a valuable source of data on the purpose of the institution. They may offer an insight into its priorities, making it possible to monitor their changes over time, comparing schools with regard to their priorities and even make the schools play a greater role in the educational policy discourse (Stemler and Bebell 2012).

## 2. SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT AS AN OBJECT OF THE STUDY

In recent years, we have observed an increasing interest in the school mission statement as an object of empirical studies. Scholars have noted the importance of the mission statement as an indicator of school effectiveness (e.g. Rutter and Maughan 2002), as a basis for creating a collaborative school culture (e.g. Gruenert 1998) or as part of a standard practice for strategic planning and school improvement program (e.g. Fritz 1996). There are studies examining the purpose and value of developing and stewarding the mission from the viewpoint of various groups of school stakeholders (e.g. Gurley et al. 2015). The answer to the question which competences should be viewed as fundamental to the core mission of a school is reflected in the assessment battery of comparative educational studies (e.g. PISA). Some very interesting findings are available showing how employers expressed their preference for educational outcomes and the most important competencies they felt were needed for college and university students to succeed in the labor market (e.g. Barwińska-Małajowicz 2012). An important direction of research that has been developing from the mid-1990s is also the work on the mission statement of higher education institutions (e.g. Kosmützky and Krücken 2015).

It is worthwhile to revise some examples of the studies concerning content themes or trends in school mission statements. In 2006, Stemler et al. studied the mission statements of 421 public high schools from ten states across the USA. The data were coded into 11 categories and then quantitatively analyzed. The researchers noted that despite the range of political and geographical diversity found in the sample, there was a clear consensus on some major purposes of secondary education across the schools. There were also significant differences in thematic emphases within states (Stemler, Bebell and Sonnabend 2011).

Slate (et al. 2008), in turn, focused on the mission statements of 100 elementary schools in Texas. Qualitative data analysis yielded 15 themes. Next, these themes were converted into numbers for statistical analysis. Quantitative analyses indicated significant differences between high and low performing elementary schools. The mission statements of high performing schools were more likely to include the themes of challenge and academic success, citizenship, empower, partnership, and social development than the mission statements of low performing schools. The researchers stressed that it was challenge combined with support that characterized the mission of the successful schools.

The idea of school as a “challenging environment” was also highlighted in the study on K-12 school mission statements carried out in 2011 by Stemler and Bebell. They studied the mission statements of a wide variety of American school types using a coding rubric to analyze the entire set of 111 mission statements. The results showed a general convergence on the importance of cognitive, emotional, and civic goals. However, notable differences by school type were also noticed. For example, the creation of a challenging school environment was observed more often in public middle school mission statements than in elementary schools. In addition, none of the Waldorf Schools sampled included any mention of elements related to challenging environment, while Apple Schools of Distinction tended to focus not only on emotional and cognitive goals, but also on providing a challenging environment. A strong emphasis on creating such a school environment was also found in Award Winning Schools (Stemler and Bebell 2012, 154-169).

A comprehensive content analysis of school mission statements was conducted in Australia. Allen et al. (2018) investigated trends in the priorities of Australian secondary schools. A stratified sample of school vision and mission statements across 308 schools from government, independent, and Catholic sectors in Victoria was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Findings indicated that academic achievement was the most common theme, with school belonging and mental health promotion themes cited by over half of the schools.

In this context, the study conducted by Boerema (2006) is worth mentioning. Using content analysis, he focused on statements from private schools in British Columbia, Canada, aiming to explore the diversity within the private school sector. The results of these analyses yielded interesting findings. For example, a considerable diversity was discovered between private school groups in the goals and objectives pursued by the schools.

The above-mentioned studies highlight the importance of school mission statements as a valuable source of data for reflecting on the schools’ priorities or comparing the purpose of schooling nationwide or abroad.

### 3. SECONDARY EDUCATION AS A LINK IN THE EDUCATION CHAIN

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that traditional European forms of secondary education began as institutions serving universities, with the purpose of preparing young people for higher education studies. In brief, they represented an advanced stage of liberal education and a narrow gateway to higher social and occupational statuses (Benavot and Resnik 2007). Generally, from the historical perspective, secondary education has served many purposes: teaching mathematics, science, and social studies; selecting candidates for higher education; helping young people to develop socially; preparing them for productive life; forming responsible citizens and healthy parents, to name a few (Alvarez, Gillies and Bradsher 2003, 18).

Benavot and Resnik (2007, 52), exploring the developments in primary and secondary education across the world, point out that the historical transformation of secondary education involved at least three interrelated shifts: (1) the expansion of the purposes of secondary schooling, (2) the establishment of new selection mechanisms to ease the transition between primary and secondary education, (3) the development of diversified curricula, and school types that address the heterogeneous interests and needs of expanding student populations.

Nowadays, although the worldwide trend is that young people learn in multiple different contexts, the developmental role of the school, secondary education in particular, is still critical at the level both of the individual and of the nation. According to Alvarez, Gillies and Bradsher (2003, 13-30), the developmental purposes of a secondary school are not limited to creating workers or solving specific problems. It should promote critical general learning and problem-solving skills that can have a positive impact on health behaviors or involvement in civil society of young people. Lewin and Caillods (2001, 354-355) point out that secondary education promotes the development of a skilled and knowledgeable citizenry with access not only to the national but also to the global economy.

Recently, secondary education has also been confronted with a multifaceted audience. Higher education institutions, local and global communities, and the labor market all need secondary education to prepare students for their present and future respective endeavors (Alvarez, Gillies and Bradsher 2003, 89). Thus, the debate on the purposes of secondary school must involve many issues simultaneously.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

##### 4.1. General background

The presented study was inspired by the research conducted by Stemler et al., who focused on goals and values in American education. My intention was to examine the nature of mission statements in public general secondary schools located in Warsaw. The aim of this study was to identify the broad themes in their mission statements. All mission statements were collected between July 1, 2018 and September 1, 2018.

##### 4.2. Data source

A sample was created using information from the website of the Education Department of the City of Warsaw. There was a list of general secondary schools ( $N = 94$ ), of which schools with publicly available mission statements were selected ( $n = 53$ ). The source of data was extant mission statements taken from the schools' websites.

##### 4.3. Data analysis

The content analysis technique was used in this study. Qualitative content analysis is probably the most prevalent approach to the analysis of documents. Generally, it

comprises a search of underlying themes and patterns in the materials being analyzed. This implies the key role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts (Bryman 2012, 557-559). Stemler (2001, 1) points out that content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. According to Gibbs (2007, 39-40), coding can be done in pre-set and/or open ways.

In this study, a hybrid approach to creating codes was used in order to avoid the dichotomy of “present” or “absent” themes in the process of coding mission statements. Thus, before beginning the coding process, a “starting list” of “a priori codes” was made based on a coding rubric for school mission statements that was developed by Stemler and colleagues. Another set of codes emerged from reading and analyzing the mission statements.

## 5. FINDINGS

Totally, 17 categories were developed: ten of them may be thought of in terms of educational results or “outputs” (e.g. cognitive development), while others may be seen as institutional goals or educational “inputs” (e.g. provide a safe environment).

Table 1 shows the frequency of the extracted dominant mission statement themes across the schools being studied.

Table 1. Percentage of schools including each major theme in their mission statements (n = 53).

Categories	N	Total %
Cognitive development	41	77
Civic development	35	66
Provide a safe environment	27	51
Social development	26	49
Preparation for adult life	22	41
Comprehensive development	21	40
Moral development	21	40
Integrate into local community	20	38
Emotional development	19	36
Provide high quality education	19	36
Individual approach to student/client	16	30
Physical development	15	28
Staff development	9	17
Cultural development	7	13
Spiritual development	6	11
Integrate into global community	3	6
Provide a challenging environment	2	4

Across these schools, cognitive development was the most frequently articulated theme (found in 77 percent of school mission statements), followed by civic development (66 percent) and providing a safe school environment (51 percent). The least frequently cited element was providing a challenging environment (4 percent of schools).

To sum up, mission statements highlight the broad range of objectives that the schools pursue, but they showed consensus on at least three major purposes of schooling: (1) cognitive development, (2) civic development, and (3) providing a safe school environment.

### 5.1. Cognitive development

The most frequently invoked theme found across all the mission statements of the schools subject to the study is the cognitive development of students. However, in the given category, there are many different elements creating a mixed picture of the ways in which schools invoke this issue in their mission statements. The analysis has shown that there are three aspects of cognitive development that schools commonly express:

- knowledge and skills;
- developing interests and passions;
- academic achievement.

The first way schools describe cognitive development in their mission statement is to speak of students' knowledge and skills. This knowledge relates to both physical and social areas. Many schools focus in their mission statement on the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed not only in further education, but also in the fast changing world. Generally, "knowledge and skills" as a mission statement subcategory can be divided into the following elements:

- 1) equip students with knowledge and skills;
- 2) support students in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills;
- 3) help students to develop communication and technological skills;
- 4) promote the development of higher-order academic skills (independent and critical thinking, open-mindedness, creativity, problem solving).

Some examples:

"We prepare our students to seek and explore knowledge, and to solve problems independently" (34);

"We strive to make sure that all our students employ the scientific method as a way of explaining the world, using logical and critical thinking" (29);

"Our purpose is to raise the children who are entrusted to us by their parents and transmitting to them reliable knowledge about the world" (17).

The second way that schools invoke cognitive development in their mission statement emphasizes the idea of developing students' interests and passions. Generally, the focus within these mission statements is on creating the opportunity for each student to discover or develop their interests and talents. For example:



“We create a friendly atmosphere to help you develop your talents” (4);

“We seek to create optimal conditions for establishing (...) an attitude of curiosity about the world and other people” (19).

The final way schools invoke a cognitive development theme in their mission statement relates to academic achievement. School mission statements describing academic achievement commonly refer to:

1) providing an education that create an opportunity for the students to be admitted to a university;

2) the focus on high academic achievement;

3) success in the matriculation examination.

For example:

“We create an inclusive and safe environment, which allows our students to develop, educate, and pursue their interests using modern methods of knowledge and skills acquisition, with the help of a highly qualified teaching staff and support from the parents, achieving spectacular results of the secondary-school leaving examination. It allows them to select a higher level education institution according to their interests and passions” (35).

## 5.2. Civic development

The analysis has revealed that the schools invoke civic development in two ways:

– patriotism;

– responsible, active and entrepreneurial citizens.

One way schools include a civic development theme in their mission statements is instilling patriotism into the students. This phrase is invoked frequently in mission statements. However, they very often stress that patriotism (also the so-called “modern patriotism”) should place individuals in wider communities: Europe and the world. Below are examples of language used in mission statements that focus on patriotic conduct:

“[...]increasing a sense of national identity and community; shaping the contemporary understanding of patriotism” (16);

“Shaping a sense of modern patriotism with the respect to the ancestral heritage, the success of their own nation and its contribution to the development of Europe and the whole world” (18);

“The mission of our school is education aimed at developing in young people the sense of responsibility, love to Homeland, and simultaneously, being open to the value of European and world’ s cultures” (29).

The other way schools express the importance of civic development in their mission statement relates to their focus on a nation of responsible, active and entrepreneurial citizens. This subcategory contains such elements as:

1) participation in the political and social life;

2) shaping a positive attitude to study and work;

3) being knowledgeable and informed members of society;

4) developing responsible and entrepreneurial citizens of Europe and the world, guided by values such as solidarity, democracy, freedom, justice and a sense of duty;

5) concern for the natural environment.

Below are select good examples from this subcategory:

“Our mission, thus mine and all our teachers’, is to support the aspiration that all of our graduates will be actively involved in the life of their community” (51);

“We want to educate youth who will have a good value system, and who will be responsible for the future, who will be a motivated group of people with the will to extend their knowledge and skills constantly” (9);

“The graduate should be primarily a very responsible person. Thus, we guarantee our students the right to make their own choices, while showing the possible impacts of their decisions” (22).

### 5.3. Providing a safe school environment

Across all the schools subject to the study, many mission statements demonstrate the importance of providing a safe school environment. In general, schools incorporate this goal in their mission statements using two approaches:

- providing a friendly and supportive environment;
- providing a secure school environment in a physical sense.

The first way that school mission statements invoke a safe environment shows how schools perceive the emotional aspect of schooling. School mission statements describing a friendly and supportive environment commonly refer to:

- 1) providing a supportive learning environment;
- 2) creating a feeling of partnership, mutual trust and help, respect, and caring;
- 3) foster an environment of tolerance, respect for human rights and dignity;
- 4) providing a positive school atmosphere;
- 5) providing pedagogical and psychological support to students;
- 6) ensuring equal opportunity for all students;
- 7) contributing to the good of the school as a whole through cultivating and creating its tradition.

Examples of this type of school mission statement:

“The school is based on kindness and mutual respect for human dignity between all members of the school community” (37);

“The school is a community based on the principles of partnership, friendship, respect in matters of freedom of beliefs and mutual assistance” (38);

“Our mission is to provide safety and a friendly atmosphere for the students. Our school is a place where the process of education is based on the rule of partnership” (40).

The second way schools refer to a safe environment in their mission statements addresses the safety of the school community members. Below are examples of the language that school mission statements use in relation to creating a safe school environment:

- 1) ensure the physical safety of students, staff, and parents;
- 2) prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors;
- 3) prevent addictions;
- 4) provide a secure, orderly educational setting.

For example:

[Our goals are:] “to be a safe and friendly school, to ensure order and discipline, and to fulfil our obligations reliably” (3);

“The mission of the school is also to counteract risky behaviors, to create an attitude of responsibility for oneself and others, and to ensure security of students, teachers and parents” (49);

“We prevent drug addiction, and individually help students at risk” (9).

## 6. DISCUSSION

The presented study examined the broad themes in general secondary school mission statements. The analysis of 53 school mission statements revealed that: 1) mission statements highlight the broad range of objectives that the schools pursue; 2) some of these goals may be thought of in terms of educational results, while others may be seen as educational “inputs”; 3) schools share certain broad beliefs about the basic purposes of schooling. As shown above, most school mission statements highlighted at least three themes: the cognitive development of their students, their civic development, and providing a safe environment.

Given that schools are primarily intended to be educational institutions, the inclusion of cognitive goals in school mission statements is not surprising. Undoubtedly, a general secondary school should focus on cognitive development of its students. Allen’s study indicated that cognitive development, and in particular academic achievement, was the most common theme, with school belonging and mental health promotion themes cited by over half the schools (Allen et al. 2018, 249-274). Stemler, Bebell and Sonnabend (2011, 383-420) reached similar conclusions working on data from public high schools. They noted that cognitive development was one of the main priorities for these schools. However, the most dominant themes cited across mission statements related to civic development and emotional development. These researchers stressed that the strong emphasis on students’ civic development appeared to be a rather distinctive feature of public high schools in America, and no other school type similarly emphasized civic development as frequently as those schools.

In the presented study, civic development was also a very frequently articulated theme. The schools invoke civic development underlying the importance of patriotic attitude and developing students who are responsible and entrepreneurial citizens. Obviously, the belief that the development of citizenship should be one of the major objectives of schooling is not new. According to Stitzlein (2014), the identity of a citizen is not individual understanding, nor is it constituted only by a sense of membership. This identity is deeply social, and citizenship itself increasingly needs to be perceived as a “shared fate”. It entails an inclination to care about everyone in the community, even people who are different or who do not adhere to a single unifying ideology. Such an approach regarding the understanding of citizenship is a consequence of globalization: technology, communication, and the economy have

drawn people from around the world together in new ways, changing the meaning of national belonging and rendering traditional patriotic citizenship obsolete. From this point of view, schools, and in particular general secondary school, should provide a space that helps create bridges between people in local and global communities. Stemler, Bebell and Sonnabend (2011) have found in their research that the sampled high schools invoke civic development in four distinct ways: productive citizenship, responsible citizenship, public service, and contribution to the society. In the authors' opinion, this finding provides some empirical support for the philosophy of Adler, who argued that the development of citizenship is one of the primary purposes of a school. Interestingly, the analyzed theme did not emerge as dominant in the sample of Australian secondary school vision and mission statements (Allen et al. 2018). The researchers stated that civic engagement had become of increasing interest to the government through the inclusion of civics and citizenship education in the National Curriculum since 2013. Despite this, words directly related to citizenship are yet to be characterized strongly in the Australian school vision and mission statements (Allen et al. 2018).

Based on the obtained results, it could be concluded that numerous school mission statements focus on the importance of developing students who are able to succeed, demonstrate their academic achievement, pursue their passions and interests, and who are simultaneously able to adapt to the changing world, developing the life skills and attitudes needed to succeed in their own lives and contribute to the well-being of their communities, both local and global. These declarations are often accompanied by statements concerning the emotional dimension of schooling. For over three decades, the importance of providing a safe, friendly and orderly school environment has been emphasized by scholars and researchers in almost all countries (e.g. Preble and Gordon 2011). Many researchers have underlined the importance of developing school policies that will create foundations for school rules that can be promulgated to create a safe and nurturing school climate (e.g. Whitlock 2006).

Across the schools subject to the study, many mission statements mention the school being a safe and friendly place. In other words, the schools highlight the emotional safety and physical protection. Interestingly, according to Stemler and Bebell (2012), the theme of a safe or nurturing environment is emerging with a various degree of frequency across all public schools. The authors observed that this theme was cited in approximately half of the sampled elementary and middle school mission statements. By contrast, 22 percent of public high school mission statements emphasized the need of providing such a school setting. However, a strong focus on mental health promotion and school belonging was evident in the results of Allen's (et al. 2018) research. This study revealed that schools did indeed prioritize academic achievement and that these two themes appeared to have a strong presence in most of the sampled school mission statements.

In light of the above findings, it can be concluded that schools prioritize not only educational outputs, but also educational inputs such as the quality of school

environment or school climate. It is likely that schools see the interconnectedness between cognitive goals and goals related to the quality of the internal school setting.

However, the obtained results may be also viewed from another perspective. One may say that only three themes were found in over 50 percent of the schools subject to the study. From this point of view, it may be stated, on the one hand, that many school mission statements shared themes, but on the other, that individual school statements were rather different than similar. Stemler, Bebell and Sonnabend (2011, 412) spoke of the “specific aims” of each individual school. They stressed that “at least in many instances, schools themselves establish and interpret the purpose of schooling in terms of local and community needs, despite the increasing presence of state and federally mandated educational reforms”.

The way in which schools define their priorities depends on the broader legislation and educational policies at the national level. Obviously, there are many legal documents that profile the purpose of schooling and, consequently, determine how educational institutions orient their priorities and goals. One of the key document is the Polish Education Law Act of December 14, 2016. As stated in the Preamble: “education and upbringing serve to foster the development of young people’s sense of responsibility, love for their homeland, and respect for the Polish cultural heritage, as well as openness towards the values of European and world cultures. The school should provide every student with the conditions necessary for their development and prepare them to perform their duties as family members and citizens, based on the principles of solidarity, democracy, tolerance, justice, and freedom.” These two sentences refer to the general purposes of education and, at the same time, outline the mission of every educational institution. This is the foundation of the curriculum of general education, which constitutes a formal interpretation of the objectives and content of education at the national level. In accordance with the Basic General Curriculum for the school year 2017/2018, Polish educational institutions for young people had five main objectives: (1) the development of cognitive skills, (2) shaping health-promoting attitudes, (3) personal and social growth, (4) shaping civic attitudes, (5) ensuring a comprehensive development of each student.

My aim is not to assess the main objectives of schools as laid down in the documents referred to above. Instead, I want to outline a framework for reflection on the priorities that the schools under study have defined in their mission statements. It is worth noting, however, that even a cursory look at those mission statements from the perspective of the aforementioned legal solutions reveals the decision-makers’ focus on educational goals rather than on educational inputs. Interestingly, the description of the mission of schools as provided in the Act puts particular emphasis on students’ civic development. It is also highlighted in the core curriculum as one of the objectives of general secondary education, alongside cognitive, social, and the so-called comprehensive development of students. Civic development was also strongly emphasized in the mission statements of the schools that took part in the study. Among the fundamental purposes of schools,

decision-makers also include “providing every student with the conditions necessary for their development,” which in the core curriculum is further detailed in the provision on personalized education at school. The core curriculum also accentuates shaping students’ pro-health attitudes, which can be considered part of the process of building a safe school environment.

The obtained results show that although these priorities were echoed in mission statements across the schools, clearly there was a range of “specific” objectives that the schools pursue. One could risk the claim that schools would probably be more accountable for those purposes that they themselves define as most important.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study must be considered with regard to its limitations. One limitation may be the difficulty in establishing a link between the objectives defined in the mission statement and their actual effect on the daily life of the school. The findings could be triangulated with data taken from other sources such as other schools’ documents or interviews with school stakeholders. In the future, it would be worthwhile to increase the sample size and use quantitative analysis methods. It will help to ascertain the reliability and validity of the study and obtain more generalizable results.

Despite these limitations, this study has showed mission statements as a useful and interesting source of information on how schools define their priorities. The results demonstrate that despite similarities between mission statements, schools signal their uniqueness in expressing their aspirations and publicly state which values are the most important to them. The diversity of the educational goals as well as the unique way the schools subject to the study perceive their own mission and role are also evident in the provisions of the above-mentioned highest-level documents on education, which also set out the mission of the school as an institution.

The obtained results may become a starting point for an in-depth reflection on the purpose, or purposes, of secondary education.

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