

THE ORGANIZATION OF ADULT PRIMARY EDUCATION'S SECOND STAGE IN LATVIA FROM 1918 TO 1940

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ABSTRACT

The study on the organization of adult basic education's second stage in Latvia from 1918 to 1940 highlights significant issues in history and education policy. During the interwar period, several attempts were made to provide accessible and quality education for adults to improve the overall educational level of society and promote socio-economic development. The aim of the study is to examine the organization of adult basic education during this period by analyzing educational institutions, their operating principles, and the political and economic context.

Through analysis of historical documents, legislation, periodicals, and secondary sources, the study identifies that several adult education institutions operated in Latvia during the interwar period, including the Latvian Youth Union Gymnasium, the Evening Secondary School of the Latvian Society for Cultural Promotion, and the State Secondary School for Adults. Despite adult education was recognized as important, it was primarily accessible to civil servants and people with higher incomes. To address this inequality, the Workers' Secondary School Association's Riga Gymnasium was established in 1927, offering evening classes at low costs. Following the 1934 coup, during the authoritarian regime, evening schools were strengthened in legislation, but no specific requirements for adult education were introduced. The findings offer historical insight into present-day educational challenges, especially the diminishing options for evening in-person format adult education in Latvia.

Keywords: *Adult education, Evening schools, Historical development of adult education, Second stage education, Supplementary school*

Introduction

Adult education is a key factor in promoting sustainable social development and inclusion, but its organization and accessibility have varied widely over time. In Latvia, the policy and practice of adult education have developed under various socio-political contexts. Of particular significance is the interwar period (1918–1940), which marked the formation of

Latvia as an independent state, the structuring of its educational system, and society's efforts to foster an educated nation (Butulis & Zunda, 2015; Apine, Balevica, & Bērziņš, 2003).

During the interwar years, several initiatives were undertaken to provide adults with access to basic education, recognizing its importance not only for individual growth but also for long-term national development. Educational institutions such as the Latvian Youth Union Gymnasium, the Evening Secondary School of the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Culture, and the State Secondary School for Adults reflect early attempts to create accessible and high-quality educational opportunities for adults. However, access to these opportunities was often unequal and typically reserved for civil servants or those with sufficient financial means. In response, the Riga Gymnasium of the Workers' Secondary School Society was established in 1927 to offer working-class adults the chance to acquire education in the evenings at an affordable cost.

After the authoritarian coup in 1934, evening schools were formally legitimized; however, no specific standards or requirements were developed for adult education. This situation highlights long-standing issues in the institutionalization of adult education in Latvia – frequently unstructured and lacking long-term strategic planning. These challenges remain relevant today. In contemporary Latvia, access to basic education for adults in evening (part-time) formats is limited. Between 2017 and 2020, significant changes in legislation led to the elimination of evening (shift) schools as a distinct school type (Oripe, 2017), drastically reducing opportunities for adults to study in person during the evening. For example, as of 2024, it is not possible to obtain basic education in an in-person evening format in Riga.

Given these modern challenges, it is essential to examine how adult education was historically organized – particularly during the formative years of Latvia's statehood. The aim of this study is to analyze how formal basic education for adults aged 18 and over was organized in Latvia between 1918 and 1940. The analysis draws on historical documents, laws, periodicals, and secondary sources, highlighting the founding principles, operation, and socio-economic significance of relevant educational institutions. The findings of this study not only illuminate past practices but also offer valuable insights for contemporary educational policy-making.

Socio-Political Context of Latvia from 1918 to 1940

The period between 1918 and 1940 was one of significant transformation and dynamism in Latvia's history. It marked the country's emergence as an independent state and the formation of its socio-political structures, shaped by both internal reforms and external diplomatic challenges.

Latvia's independence was proclaimed on 18 November 1918, a milestone following centuries of foreign domination by Sweden, Poland, and the Russian Empire. For the first time in history, all Latvian-inhabited regions were unified under one national state. However, this unity also revealed considerable regional, ethnic, social, and religious diversity within the newly established republic (Butulis & Zunda, 2015).

According to *Likumdevēju darbības vēsture* [History of legislative activity] by *Latvijas Republikas Saeima* [Parliament of the Republic of Latvia], (2024), the historical period from 1918 to 1940 can be divided into two distinct phases: the parliamentary republic era (1918–1934) and the authoritarian regime (1934–1940). Initially, the People's Council, formed on 17 November 1918 by eight Latvian democratic political parties and a representative of the Latgale Provisional Land Council, served as the country's first legislative body. Due to ongoing political instability, general elections were not immediately feasible. This initial phase was marked by significant social unrest, food shortages, and Bolshevik military aggression, culminating in the establishment of the short-lived Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic and the subsequent War of Independence (1918–1920). The first democratically elected legislative body, the Constitutional Assembly (*Satversmes sapulce*), held its elections on 17–18 April 1920. With a voter turnout of 84.9% (677,084 eligible voters), 150 deputies, including five women, were elected. The Assembly drafted the Constitution (*Satversme*), which on 26 January 1921, Latvia and Estonia were granted *de jure* recognition by the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers, followed by diplomatic recognition from Finland, Poland, and many other nations. Ultimately, 42 countries recognized Latvia during the interwar period, with the United States being the last major power to do so in 1922 (Butulis & Zunda, 2015).

Despite its growing international legitimacy, Latvia faced considerable domestic challenges. Before World War I, Latvia had been one of the most industrially developed peripheral regions of the Russian Empire. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the newly independent state shifted toward a self-sufficient economy focused on goods produced primarily for domestic use. Latvian industry was characterized by a diverse range of products, including the internationally acclaimed Minox miniature camera and locally manufactured sports aircraft. In the field of education, Latvia boasted a high proportion of university students relative to its population, ranking second in Europe in terms of student enrollment in higher education (Apine, Baleviča, & Bērziņš, 2003).

A major turning point occurred on the night of 15 to 16 May 1934, when Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis led a coup d'état, dissolving the parliament and establishing an authoritarian regime. Historians and scholars continue to debate this period: while it was characterized by relative economic growth and national consolidation, it also involved political repression, the suppression of opposition parties, and censorship of the press.

This chapter concludes with the dramatic shift in Latvia's political fate in June 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied the country, effectively ending its independence and ushering in a new era of political and social transformation.

Legislative Foundations and Policy Development of Adult Basic Education in Latvia (1918–1940)

Education is a foundational instrument for the development of knowledge, skills, culture, and personal growth. It represents a structured effort to enhance individual capacities, and adult education constitutes an integral part of this lifelong process.

Although the term “adult education” emerged only in the 18th century, the significance of educating adults was recognized much earlier – already discussed by philosophers in ancient Greece. In the territory of Latvia, adult education initially developed alongside the Christianization process, as literacy became essential for reading prayers and scriptures. However, the formal structure of adult basic education in Latvia can be clearly traced to the post-1918 period, following the proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia.

For the first time in Latvian history, a systematic and consistent national education policy was implemented under the democratic framework of the newly independent republic. This policy was marked by a commitment to democratization and reflected the state’s genuine interest in raising the educational level of its citizens. The development of the school system during this period can be divided into two phases: the parliamentary period (1918–1934) and the authoritarian regime (1934–1940), each with its own distinct characteristics and commonalities (Apine, Balevica, Bērziņš, 2003).

A key milestone was the adoption of the Law on Educational Institutions of Latvia on 8 December 1919, which introduced compulsory education for children between the ages of 7 and 16. This included:

- a) Home education or pre-school (ages 7–8);
- b) Primary school (ages 9–14); and
- c) Supplementary school (ages 15–16).

Education was free of charge, and primary education was structured in two levels – four years in the first stage and two in the second. While the law did not directly mention adult education, it provided a foundation for it. Article 50 specified that supplementary schools should be established by the government and local authorities in the form of evening classes, Sunday schools, or revision courses, with a minimum of 180 instructional hours annually (Law on Educational Institutions of Latvia, 1919).

The restructuring of the education system was briefly interrupted by the invasion of the Red Army. On 16 January 1920, a decree “On Educational and Upbringing Institutions of Latvia” was issued under Soviet administration, introducing the concept of a unified “labour school.” Following the expulsion of the Bolsheviks, the provisional Latvian government resumed work on the national education system, reaffirming the framework of the 1919 law. However, the new system faced serious challenges, including a lack of facilities, teaching materials, and qualified educators. In the first years of independence, secondary schools (gymnasiums) adapted flexibly to bridge the existing disparities in educational levels. By 1928, the number of secondary school graduates had nearly doubled, leading to the emergence of a significant class of unemployed intellectuals. In response, from 1925 onwards, secondary schools were classified into two types – Realschulen and Gymnasien – to manage the issue (Apine, Balevica, Bērziņš, 2003).

Following the authoritarian takeover on 15 May 1934, significant changes were introduced to the Latvian education system. On 27 July 1934, the Law on National Education was adopted, marking the first legal act to explicitly mention evening schools. According to Article 39, the state and municipalities were authorized to establish free evening

elementary schools for individuals aged 16 and above who had not completed basic education, provided that at least 30 applicants registered. Article 44 allowed supplementary schools to operate independently or be replaced by evening schools and various courses. Notably, the law did not impose additional specific requirements on adult basic or secondary education, regulating these forms of education under the same rules as general secondary schools (Likums par tautas izglītību [The Law on Public Education], 1934).

Within the framework of this law, private educational institutions were also legally defined and regulated. Article 103 considered a private educational institution as any establishment where children of school age from various families were educated and raised together, alongside the education of adults, provided the total number of students exceeded nine. These institutions could be organized and maintained by associations, unions, other legal entities, or private individuals. Furthermore, Articles 111 to 121 specified the organization of general education courses aimed at persons who had exceeded the age of compulsory schooling (Article 118), as well as specialized courses offering vocational or subject-specific education, either alone or combined with general education (Article 119). Various adult schools providing these courses could be established and maintained by the state, municipalities, private individuals, or legal entities (Articles 120–121) (Likums par tautas izglītību [The Law on Public Education], 1934).

An analysis of Latvian periodicals from this time reveals that Latvia not only laid the foundation for formal adult education between 1918 and 1940 but also demonstrated a strong interest in how such education was organized in other European countries. For example, the 1930 issue of *Ārpusskolas izglītība* [Extracurricular education] featured an article titled “*Organizing Free Adult Education in Germany and in Our Country*,” which examined the German model, including evening schools. Similarly, the article *Ārpusskolas izglītība* [Extracurricular Education] in the 1 October 1930 issue of *Signāls* [Signal] discussed Western European workers’ schools and their achievements.

Institutional Emergence and Practice of Adult Formal Education in Interwar Latvia

During the interwar period, alongside legislative developments, the first educational institutions specifically targeting adult learners began to emerge in Latvia. These efforts reflected a growing societal interest in expanding access to formal education beyond childhood and adolescence, particularly in the newly established Republic of Latvia after 1918.

One of the most significant steps in this field was the establishment of supplementary school –evening classes intended for adults who had not obtained basic education. These schools marked the beginning of a formal structure for adult education in Latvia and were often initiated either by municipal authorities or private organizations.

Among one of the first such institutions was the supplementary school of Riga City 16th Primary School, opened in the 1922/1923 academic year. Located in the same building (later known as Friča Brīvzemnieka Primary School), and led initially by F. Ieviņš, this

school provided adults with the opportunity to acquire basic education during evening hours. It became a foundational element in expanding access to education for those unable to attend regular daytime classes due to work obligations. (Friča Brīvēznieka pamatskola, Skolas vēsture [Fričis Brīvēznieks Primary School, School History], n.d.)

In 1932, the institution was renamed Riga City 3rd Evening Primary School and continued to operate throughout the following decade. Despite changes in its physical location, the teaching process remained uninterrupted. This institution is considered a predecessor of the later Riga 14th Evening (Shift) Secondary School, established during the Soviet era, though its roots trace back to the 1920s. (Rīgas 14. vakara (maiņu) vidusskola, Rīgas 14. vakara (maiņu) vidusskolas vēsture, [Riga 14th Evening (Shift) Secondary School, History of Riga 14th Evening (Shift) Secondary School], n.d.)

Other districts of Riga also established supplementary schools with similar functions. For example, Riga City 6th Evening Primary School in Sarkandaugava, located at Allažu Street 4, provided opportunities for adults to gain the education they had previously missed. These schools laid the foundation for a more inclusive education system, demonstrating the commitment of both the state and society to lifelong learning. (Cita Rīga [A Different Riga], n.d.)

According to the 1930 resource, the Rainis un Strādnieku vidusskola [Rainis and Workers' High School, 1930], published in Rosme 3 [01.03.1930, Rosme 3], after completing supplementary or evening primary school, adults seeking further education had several options available to them. While traditional gymnasiums continued to serve younger students, People's High Schools (latv. – *tautas augstskolas*) emerged as an important pathway for adult learners. Although the preparatory courses offered at these schools were not legally equivalent to formal secondary education, their pedagogical results were often impressive. Nevertheless, efforts to achieve legal parity with secondary school graduates initially remained unsuccessful.

As Attis Kēniņš emphasized in his article “Lauku tautasaugstskolas un tautas augstskolu kursi” [Rural Folk High Schools and Folk High School Courses], published in Ārpusskolas Izglītība, No. 2 (01.02.1928), the establishment of folk high schools in the Latvian countryside marked a significant stage in the development of extracurricular education. However, he distinguished clearly between fully developed folk high schools and the more modest “folk high school courses” prevalent at the time.

Many of these courses were short-term lecture series held a few hours a week and lacked the residential and community-building components central to the Danish model of folk high schools. According to Kēniņš, a true rural folk high school required communal living, active engagement, and a transformative educational mission focused on character development and the nurturing of social idealism among the youth.

The curriculum approved in 1927 envisioned around 960 hours of instruction, covering a wide array of subjects such as Latvian language and literature, civics, natural sciences, hygiene, handicrafts, and physical education. Emphasis was placed not only on academic learning but also on the cultivation of moral values, civic responsibility, and practical skills.

In contrast, the three-month folk high school courses organized by the Central Education Union offered around 117 hours of instruction and were designed as transitional educational experiences. Held primarily during evenings and weekends, these courses covered subjects like Latvian history, literature, mathematics, civics, and religion. They also included specialized subjects such as foreign languages and home economics, tailored to the local population's needs. Despite their limited duration, these courses played a key role in promoting self-education and community learning.

Kēniņš concluded that while the establishment of fully developed rural folk high schools remained a long-term challenge due to resource constraints, the organization of short-term courses was an essential and immediate step in addressing widespread demand for adult education (Kēniņš, 1928).

Other formal avenues for adult education also emerged during this period. In 1920, the Latvian Youth Union Gymnasium was founded, evolving from the youth organization "Jaunība" [Youth]. Two years later, in 1922, the Evening Secondary School of the Latvian Cultural Promotion Society began operations. The State Secondary School for Adults also functioned during this period, albeit with relatively high tuition fees. These institutions primarily served civil servants – especially those who finished work by 15:00 – though some tuition exemptions were granted.

A notable policy discussion appeared in Valsts Darbinieks [State Employee] (No. 2, 1926), where the need for public servants to enhance their education was stressed. It recommended that mid-level public employees (categories VIII to XIII) be required to hold secondary school diplomas and proposed removing financial barriers to accessing adult evening secondary schools.

A turning point came in 1926, when a group of People's High School students appealed to the poet Rainis for support in establishing a new educational institution. This initiative led to the founding of the Workers' Secondary School Society on 28 July 1927. The Ministry of Education approved its statutes in August, and evening classes began on 16 September 1927 in the building of Riga's 3rd Secondary School on Valdemāra Street. A total of 190 students enrolled, with classes held from 19:00 to 22:00. In 1929, the institution was renamed Rainis Gymnasium. Tuition ranged from 60 to 100 Latvian lats, depending on the grade. This school represents a historically significant example of students themselves initiating a formal secondary institution (Trotīte, 1987).

In the article *Vai vispārējās izglītības vidusskolu ir par daudz?* [Are there too many general secondary schools?] published in Jēkabpils Vēstnesis [Jēkabpils Herald], issue 6 (1927), noted that by the 1926–27 academic year, a total of 51 general secondary schools were operating in Latvia, using Latvian as the language of instruction. Among them, three were specifically designated as evening schools for adults.

These institutional developments provided crucial educational opportunities for working adults and reflect a broader national aspiration for personal advancement, civic participation, and social progress through education.

Conclusion

The period between 1918 and 1940 marked a formative era in the development of adult basic education in Latvia, characterized by legal advancements, institutional diversification, and an emerging recognition of adults as legitimate participants in formal education. Following the establishment of the Latvian Republic in 1918, the country undertook determined efforts to expand access to education for all citizens. Compulsory, tuition-free six-grade basic education was implemented, alongside the development of an extensive secondary school network and the opportunity to pursue higher academic education in the Latvian language. The modern second stage of basic education corresponds to the first and second classes of the interwar secondary school system.

Although the 1919 Law on Educational Institutions did not explicitly address adult education, it provided mechanisms such as supplementary schools, evening courses, and Sunday schools that opened pathways for adult learners. The 1934 Law on National Education further institutionalized adult education by allowing the establishment of evening elementary schools for individuals over 16 who had not completed their basic education, if at least 30 applicants were registered. This was the first instance where adult education was clearly and legally supported as part of the national education system.

In addition to formal legal frameworks, a number of educational institutions specifically targeting adults emerged during this period. These included the Latvian Youth Union Gymnasium, the Evening Secondary School of the Latvian Cultural Promotion Society, and most notably, the Rainis Gymnasium, founded in 1927 by the Workers' Secondary School Society. Rainis Gymnasium became the first institution to offer evening secondary education for workers at a reduced fee, with classes held from 19:00 to 22:00 on weekdays. While a few other schools also served adult learners, they were primarily geared toward civil servants and were financially less accessible to the working class.

As an alternative to traditional secondary schools, People's High Schools provided preparatory courses for adults. Although these programs were not officially recognized as equivalent to formal secondary education, their academic rigor often surpassed that of recognized schools. Despite the efforts of learners and educators to secure equal legal status for these schools, such recognition was not achieved during this period.

A comparative glance at the present reveals a notable discrepancy: contemporary Latvia does not offer the second stage of basic education (comparable to interwar secondary school levels I and II) in an evening or part-time in-person format for adults. This gap underscores a potential area for policy development and revitalization of inclusive education strategies for adult learners today.

In conclusion, the interwar period in Latvia laid critical foundations for adult education, demonstrating a forward-looking approach that recognized education as a lifelong and inclusive process. Legal provisions, institutional experiments, and grassroots initiatives together shaped a system that, while not without limitations, served as a model of civic commitment to educational access. Revisiting these historical insights may help inform current educational reforms, particularly in addressing the unmet needs of adult learners in Latvia and beyond.

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