

EDUCATION IN TRANSITION: CHANGES IN THE POLISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Along with Solidarity's ascent to power in 1989 has come a tide of ideological, political and economic change creating a need for new social structures in all sectors, including the Polish educational system. The aim of this paper is to present some recent reforms generated by the transition from a Marxist-socialist to a democratic pedagogy. Specifically, this analysis will view issues surrounding the reintroduction of religion in public schools, the trend toward private and community schools, decreasing enrollment in the humanities and the growing demand for vocational schools. An attempt will also be made to illuminate the role of teachers and parents in the reformation of Poland's educational system.

Avec l'ascension au pouvoir du mouvement de Solidarité en 1989, un courant de changements idéologiques, politiques et économiques a créé une demande de nouvelles structures sociales dans tous les secteurs de la société, y compris le domaine de l'éducation. Cet article a pour but de présenter quelques réformes récentes, mises en oeuvre par la transition de la pédagogie, à partir de la base marxiste-socialiste vers la base démocratique. L'analyse s'attaque surtout aux problèmes provenant de la ré-introduction de l'enseignement de la religion dans les écoles publiques, de la tendance de s'inscrire aux écoles privées ou communautaires, de la diminution des enregistrements dans les humanités et de l'augmentation des demandes des écoles de formation professionnelle. Le rôle joué par le corps enseignant et des parents dans la réforme du système d'éducation y est aussi traité.

In the past forty-five years in Poland the State determined the organizational, administrative and curricular structures of schools and other educational institutions. Central among its goals was the promotion of socialist

values. Now, after more than four decades of Marxist-socialist pedagogy, Poland is engaged in constructing an educational system that will be compatible with the emerging democratic framework. The challenges are many. The dramatic events of the 1980s and 1990s brought with them increasing awareness of the need for an educational system that could promote democratic values and laws inherent in notions such as free speech and unrestrained access to information on a global scale. According to Wszolek (1990), initially, there was no clear vision of educational system in the new Poland. Even so, at the beginning of the current decade the Minister of National Education addressed important issues such as compulsory education for students between 7 and 17 years of age; school autonomy; access to education within the context of a free democratic society. In 1990, a newly drafted *Law* contained three proposals for educational reform.

The first, so-called "conservative" proposal, introduced minimal changes to the old *Law* of 1961. The second, somewhat more moderate proposal considered the feasibility of introducing parent associations into the framework of the national educational system. The third, or "radical" document posited two divergent options. It proposed that either the greater proportion of decision making power could be ceded to parents, leaving a minimal role to administrators, or alternatively, complete decision making authority could reside with educators and other professionals in the field.

Also worthy of note in this new *Law* were Articles 2 and 4 which endorsed involvement of religious instructors in education as well as inclusion of formal religious instruction in the public school curriculum. In the same *Law* Articles 20, 25, and 30 advocated a greater role for parents and teachers by calling for greater interaction among the Committee of Parents (Komitet Rodzicielski), the Pedagogical Council (Rada Pedagogiczna) and the Educational Council (Kuratorium Oświatowe). Interestingly, this new *Law* did not advocate creation of a Chamber of Teachers (Izba Nauczycielska) to resolve problems of a disciplinary nature and issues of educational methodology.

REINTRODUCTION OF RELIGION TO POLISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A notable aspect of recent Polish educational reform has been the influence and growing status of the Catholic Church. In 1961, amidst considerable debate, Religion, as a formal subject, had been eliminated from the public school curriculum. This decision had been grounded in the view that schools should be free from any indoctrination and that therefore, religious instruction should be left to the Church. However, in the recent climate of change, the issue of religion being a part of the public school curriculum was raised again. As it had several decades earlier, the question

provoked intense discussion, especially within government (Gajewska, 1990). Opposition to this proposal was evident in statements made by Anna Radziwil, the Deputy Minister of Education who argued that the move would be a mistake. Members of the SDRP Party (Social Democracy in the Republic of Poland) noted that introduction of religious education in public schools would be a violation of the constitutional right to free choice. The Polish Social Democratic Union also disagreed with the idea primarily on the grounds that it had been introduced with no general public discussion (Wolowski, 1990).

Gajewska's analysis of the issue (1990) highlights certain important positions in this debate. She observes, for example, that from the public's view the performance of daily prayer was seen as contradicting the principle of freedom of conscience and belief. Children who might choose not to pray as well as children of other faiths might experience a sense of social isolation which could, in turn, set them up as potential targets for discrimination. In the past, it was argued, such problems had been circumvented because religious instruction had taken place in Catechism Centres associated with the Church rather than in public school buildings. That particular arrangement had facilitated the freedom of choice in the matter of religious instruction. Also noted as problematic was the presence of priests in schools. This was viewed by opponents as conflicting with the secular character of public schools. However, despite such opposition, in June of 1990 the Joint Commission of the Government and Polish Episcopate moved to reintroduce religion into the school curriculum, with the specification that such instruction take place twice weekly in all grades.

In addition to the development surrounding formal religious instruction in schools the Church has also been active in discussions of educational philosophy. In 1990, for example, the Primate's Social Council (Prymasowska Rada Spoleczna) articulated three key requirements for the reconstruction of Poland's educational system:

1. Creation of an educational environment conducive to critical, independent thinking and free choice, which eliminates "school fear" and promotes the role of the family within society;
2. Creation of an educational environment which prepares the new generations for active involvement in a democratically reformed Poland; which promotes responsible social participation by the individual; which encourages historical and cultural appreciation and awareness; and which encourages an attitude of tolerance among the nation's youth;
3. An educational system founded on philosophy which advances individualism, self-education and continuing education; which prepares

students to approach television viewing in a critically selective manner; and which accommodates a summer holiday for children.

NEW EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES: COMMUNITY AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Private Schools

During the Communist era, the public school system had been free and school attendance had been compulsory for children from the ages of 7 through 16. The current tide of social and political change has brought about a wide interest of communities in private schools. Such schools have been welcomed as a healthy alternative to the established public school system. As a general rule, private schools may now be set up by individuals, foundations, or by religious associations under the condition that the owner is to submit the program of studies to the local school board for evaluation. This program must meet the regulations and standards of public school programs, including its rules regarding evaluation procedures. Private school owners may exercise their own judgment about matters such as school organization, personnel, tuition fees and other budget decisions. Private school programs also tend to set as compulsory a variety of extra-curricular lectures on various subjects. Instruction in small classes of 10 to 20 students, within a creative, friendly atmosphere intended to encourage independent thinking, emotional self expression, athletic development and art appreciation, is one of the primary goals of the newly created private schools.

The first such schools appeared in 1989. Since that time, their numbers have increased rapidly. In Lodz, for example, the second largest city in Poland, a 1993 count indicated the presence of 70 alternative schools, including 20 elementary, 24 "lycees" or four year general high schools, 11 vocational or post-elementary schools, along with 17 daycare centres. It was estimated that in Lodz, more than 3,000 students were enrolled in alternative schools. Private daycares under the supervision of nuns have also become popular since 1990. It is interesting to note that similar daycares existed prior to the World War II but had not been reintroduced by the communist regime.

The recent *Law* of 1991 formally recognized alternative schools as a legitimate option to the public school system. In 1993 there were 600 nonpublic schools and by the first half of 1994 there were already 984 such schools in Poland. Most private schools are located in major urban centres such as Warsaw which has 170, Lodz with 93, and Szczecin with 79. According to a survey conducted in August 1994 by Demoscop, 90,000 students were enrolled in alternative schools. The same study also found that 42% of parents

surveyed indicated that, were they financially able to do so, they would enroll their children in private schools.

Community Schools

Another version of alternative education, in the form of "community schools", has been initiated by individuals as well as by educational associations. In contrast to private schools, community schools are nonprofit institutions. The main advocate of this trend has been the Association of Community Education (Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oswiatowe - STO) which is an administrative body responsible for 120 schools. The STO has democratically elected representatives from all regions (Kola Terenowe) of the country. Financing for community schools is derived from a combination of student tuition and government funding, with the latter amounting to 50% of the sum granted per student enrolled in the public school system. According to Nowakowska (1994), escalating fees and lack of good programs have diminished much of the initial enthusiasm for community schools. Even so, individual community schools, like those under the leadership of Naslakowski, a professor from Copernicus University in Torun, and Straszewska and Lezenski, both professors at the University of Warsaw, enjoy good reputation. This has been attributed to their excellent curricula, strong financial support from Polish entrepreneurs and the high success rate of their school graduates on university entrance examinations.

SECONDARY EDUCATION:

AN INCREASED NUMBER OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

Depending on their academic performance, Polish students, upon completion of elementary school (grades 1 through 8) may enter either a lycee (academic stream), a technical secondary school or a vocational school. Normally students begin their secondary education at the age of 15-16. Only those with an above 90% average can register in the school of their choice without writing an entrance examination. Students with low grades are usually advised to consider a vocational school.

Lycees are four year secondary institutions, successful completion of which is the normal route to university entrance. After the first year, lycee students begin to concentrate on a preferred field or area of study. Specialty options vary from one institution to another. Some schools offer a choice between humanities and science subjects, while others specialize in single area, e.g. medicine, art or physical education. Student progress is monitored via several sets of annual examinations and the final "matura" or matriculation examination. Although the "matura" is optional, successful performance on this

exam is critical for university entrance. Therefore, the majority of lycee students undertake this exam.

Curricula in the technical or engineering high schools focus on areas such as mechanics, electrical, automotive, and textile studies. Graduates of technical high schools may aim for a technician's certificate in a given area, or alternatively, they may proceed to advanced studies at a university, polytechnical institute, medical or art school.

Vocational high schools, by contrast to lycees and technical schools, allow graduates much more limited opportunities when it comes to post-secondary education. Such schools tend to be of 2 or 3 years duration, with the focus being on practical skills development in specific occupations. They are sometimes located near factories or industrial areas, and their programs include apprenticeship or practical "on the job experience" with an emphasis on manual or occupation specific skill acquisition. Given this orientation, graduates of vocational schools who decide to proceed to post-secondary studies face the task of considerable additional academic preparation. This drawback has been underscored by recent rapidly changing labour demands which have rendered the limited skills of vocational school graduates unmarketable, forcing many to return to school. As a result of the academic obstacles to post-secondary entrance such students face, there has been growing criticism of vocational school programs for their weakness in humanities and social sciences instruction (Majcherek, 1994). In her critical remarks on vocational schools, Bialkowska (1993) also emphasized the need for adjustment of these schools' programs to the new economic structures and labour market.

Despite these shortcomings, the relatively short duration of vocational school training and the fact that students acquire a diploma and practical occupational experience continue to appeal to them. Moreover, significant numbers of employed graduates appreciate being able to enjoy regular income while upgrading their education via correspondence or evening school programs. Most noteworthy, in terms of this discussion, is evidence of a trend toward higher enrollment in the more practically oriented vocational schools as compared to lycees and technical high schools (Grzelak, 1993).

HIGHER EDUCATION

Transformation of the economy has engendered a new array of labour market demands. As a result not only has the need for specialists in certain areas decreased, within the last decade there has also been a general reduction in total employment (Kluczynski, 1980). Yet, on a nation-wide scale, the structure of post secondary education in Poland has remained essentially

unchanged despite the dramatic social upheavals of the recent past (Grzelak, 1993). But, even though the 117 state post-secondary academic institutions awarding masters and doctorate degrees continue to operate, enrollment has become uneven. An unfavourable job market has been reflected in diminishing enrollment in such faculties as science, law, history, Polish language and literature (Piasek and Voughan, 1987). While Institutes of Technology and Schools of Economics have suffered as much as a 65% drop in enrollment, Medical Schools and Teachers Colleges have experienced some growth. In spite of everything, it is worth observing that overall enrollment in post-secondary institutions has increased from 277,174 in 1989 to 338,265 in 1992 (Grzelak, 1993).

Findings from the 1984 Dippelhofer-Stiem et al. study, which compared European student motives in selecting a field of study or career, revealed that Polish students tended to make their choice on the basis of interest in a subject, personal aptitude or desire to practice a specific profession rather than on the basis of future income or career opportunities. It should be noted, however, that this was before unemployment became a major social problem. The same study revealed that Polish students preferred to work without political pressure, in an environment which encouraged individualism, participation and communication. These students respondents also felt that teachers should have greater freedom in choice of teaching methodology and viewed educators as deserving of higher social status and improved career opportunities. Since the onset of social and economic reforms in 1989, new trends in student attitudes have become apparent (Grzelak, 1993). For example, students have not only begun to focus on financially rewarding professions, but many have also chosen to abandon advanced academic studies for well paid jobs in the private sector.

THE TEACHER

During the communist era, the prestige associated with the teaching profession has declined. Contributing to this have been factors such as poor working conditions, pressure, overcrowded classrooms (often more than 40 students per class), inadequate teaching materials, double shifts, low salaries, etc. Compounding these problems was pressure from the State that teaching be done according to Marxist philosophy and that teachers become Communist Party members. Officials identified those who conformed as the "best" teachers. Not only did this sap the morale of many educators, it also destroyed the professional ethic. Cultivated over centuries of conquest, (including the disappearance of Poland from 1795 to 1918) when, in the face of terrible sanctions, teachers had bravely helped preserve the national language and culture, the ideal Polish teacher gained a reputation as one who

guided Polish youth in matters of justice, truth, goodness and beauty. The communist era did much to undermine the traditional image of teachers in Polish society. It must be recognized, however, that even during this period (1945-89) many Polish educators did question the system and exerted their energies to encourage freedom of thought and democratic principles. In fact much of Solidarity's success had been attributed to the efforts of such educators as noted by the former Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki in 1989:

The state of education gives rise to a serious concern. Continuous neglect and underfunding are taking their toll. The fact that, in spite of these conditions, schools are turning out graduates with high standards is to be credited to those teachers who treat their profession as a vocation and a social service (1991, p. 8).

Fortunately, as reported by Bialkowska (1993), the proposal of educational reform, accepted by the government in 1993, calls for teachers' salaries to be increased to the level of those paid to government employees by 1996. Yet it also includes a number of notions which the Polish Teachers' Association (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego) opposes. Among them are the extended teaching load and time limited contract based employment. Consequently, 78% of teachers, members of the Association, voted in favour of the previous policy and thus preservation of the former "Teacher's Card" (Karta Nauczyciela).

EDUCATION AND POLISH FAMILY VALUES

It is recognized that educational goals encompass notions of creating and nurturing the individual student's personality as well as promoting social and cultural norms, values and behavioural codes, i.e. socialization. Ideally, both school and family share the same goals, reinforcing each other's efforts, while the State creates an environment in which parents and teachers can fulfill the task of rearing the new generations. It might be useful, therefore, to look more closely at the role of the Polish family in this discussion of the Polish educational system.

Despite decades of repressive communist policies, most Polish families sustained their traditional values. Long before Solidarity, Polish families had rejected the communist emphasis on Marxist theory and glorification of State interest above all else. Ultimately, the purpose of socialist education was the molding of students to conform with and reinforce State objectives, thus minimizing the influence of family. The widespread rejection of socialist

educational philosophy was part of the population's overall resistance to communist ideology. At the same time it cannot be denied that some families, either in the interests of personal or career gains, out of fear of repression because of ideological commitment, endorsed the communist perspective. Yet despite official pressure to the contrary, the Polish family retained its traditional high status across generations. Such resistance to the official position on state versus family was evident in the findings of both Dippelhofer-Stiem's (1984) and Bargel's (1982) studies, which found that Polish students valued family life more highly than personal career interests. Other significant findings raised by these studies included student support of parental involvement in educational matters and student recognition of family as pivotal in the socialization of children.

FINAL REMARKS

The Polish education system today is in a state of transition. There remain many problems to be resolved and many challenges to be faced. The issue of religion in the schools is an example. Whether religious education will survive as part of the standard Polish school curriculum is unclear at present. Another important matter concerns the relevance of higher education programs to the needs of a modern democratic Poland. Also, the system of elementary education faces a major reform which in respect to country schools would give the ultimate authority to municipal administration. As reported by Bialkowska (1993), this transfer of power and control should apparently result in a closer bond between these schools and the needs of local regions.

These are but three problems raised by the current process of educational reconstruction. Grzelak has noted that, "Many people are tired of changes and frustrated by slow and not always visible progress" (1993, p. 419). Nevertheless, those changes which have already taken place in Polish education can be seen as the beginnings of a solid foundation that will support the new structures.

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