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**TERMS OF REFORMING THE POLISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM
IN POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION PERIOD**

Abstract: The turn of the 80. and 90. of the XX century was a period of great political, economic and social changes in Poland. Introduction of democratic principles and Poland joining in the processes of European integration required a quick adaptation of the educational model to the changing social and economic conditions. In the new reality of the state's functioning the educational model based on central management became inadequate because it was applying uniform patterns of education characteristic for the communist era. The range of student's competence in the course of education was considered insufficient. In the era of market economy and general access to information the educational model based on encyclopedic knowledge also became inadequate. The required features which needed to be developed in a future citizen were: openness, creativity, initiative, the ability to function in conditions of competitiveness (Rodzoś, Charzyński 2005). It was particularly significant to prepare the young generation essentially for the proper reception and interpretation of the social and economic processes and changes occurring in the surrounding world. All of the above mentioned reasons lead to passing a bill on a new educational system by the Sejm of Poland in 1990 and beginning the process of reforms.

However, carrying out the reforms in conditions of the state's difficult financial situation as well as in the context of social habits formed during the 45 years of functioning in the totalitarian system causes numerous problems and inconsistency. The basic ones are: lack of cohesion of educational policy and frequent changes of the concept of reforms resulting not from aspiration to increase the effectiveness of education, but from political and economic rationale; discrepancy between the theory of reform and its practical realization; appearance of activities and too hasty introduction of some changes, and lack of mental preparation of the society. These problems defer the process of reform and aggravate gaining positive results in the form of society's education which is better and well adapted to the needs of the contemporary world; they led as well to a decrease in prestige of the profession of a teacher.

Despite the difficulties, many positive changes have also been obtained in the Polish educational system, i.e. making education non-political, increase of the society's general level of education, implementation of the concept of life-long learning as well as introduction of many educational patterns copied from countries with well developed democratic systems, especially in the European Union.

Key words: political transformation, educational system reform, reform issues

INTRODUCTION

In every country, regardless of the political system and the socio-economic situation, school education has similar tasks – prepares students for grown-up life in society by: equipping them with adequate knowledge, developing manifold skills as well as forming their system of views and beliefs which constitute the socially accepted world view.

However, an analysis of various educational systems indicates that this accordance of educational aims occurs only on the general level. Depending on the cultural traditions and the political and economic system of the country, the range of required knowledge and preferable skills, views and attitudes is different. The ways of obtaining ideal education may also be different. In democratic societies the overriding aim of education is to form the following features in their future citizens: independence, openness, creativity, responsibility, communication or the ability to make decisions. These are, however, qualities which are undesirable in totalitarian societies, where all situations which could favour the development of independent thinking and acting are limited. School in undemocratic countries by design teaches passivity and subordination. It is also a tool of political propaganda.

On account of a close connection of education with politics as well as socio-economic life, each country undergoing a political system transformation must adapt its educational system to the changing reality. All the countries of the socialist Eastern Block, including Poland, which were liberated in the 1980s and 1990s from the totalitarian yoke, were obliged to confront this necessity. The reform of the educational system in the countries at the beginning of democracy was both a result of the occurring political, socio-economic changes and an essential condition of social revival in these countries.

The aim of this paper is to present the conditions in which the reform of the Polish educational system has been realized for over 20 years, its main assumptions and specific social, political and economical problems which make realization and successful conclusion of the process difficult.

POLISH SCHOOL IN THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM

With regard to its role in forming a definite world-view and social attitude a school's activity always remains in politicians' "eyeshot" (Santome 2007). School is used for propagating certain values, but also for gaining social support. In the socialist system school was particularly subordinate to political purposes. It was made one of the main tools of ideological indoctrination, it was actively included in the process of building the new socio-economic order. The educational heritage of the pre- Second World War era was rejected, because it was verified and negatively assessed. Previously elaborated theoretical educational presumptions were criticised, programmes, textbooks, methods of work and organization of education were changed. The school system was nationalized, centralized and standardized. School life was regulated by adequate decrees coming from the state level. The educational aims, contents and methods were imposed from the same level. Pedagogical and didactic principles were based on Russian pedagogical literature taking into account the ideas of Marxism and Leninism. The western educational patterns were rejected for the return to the 19th century herbartism – a concept of education dismissed in democratic countries because of its dogmatism, uniformity of methods, neglecting a child's individual work, and possibility of manipulation. The whole pedagogic philosophy of Herbart was warped by treating its presumptions selectively (Kupisiewicz 1995). The drawbacks of his pedagogical concept became benefits for the socialist school system where the main aim was to educate citizens who have the same beliefs, who are subordinate to the authorities' will, dependent and inactive – susceptible to external control. In the socialist system school was a tool of social propaganda. It was used as evidence of superiority of socialism over capitalism. Therefore, quantitative educational development was a priority – new schools were open and the time of obligatory education was prolonged. The number of graduates of each type of school was growing rapidly. Children from the most neglected environments i.e. rural and labour, were of particular concern then. An unquestionable contribution of the system was eradication of illiteracy and a partial removal of educational barriers in the poorer social groups. On the other hand, the quality of education was low. School of this period cared mainly for transfer of knowledge. Students acquired large numbers of facts, concepts and names, without the need for understanding nor using them in practice.

The socialist system also created a specific type of teacher with many unwelcome features. The imposed guidelines, as far as content selection and educational methods were concerned, suppressed the teachers' creative initiative. Moreover, this occupational group was deliberately poorly paid, which resulted in an attitude of mediocrity strengthening over time. Increasingly, people with

weak personalities and low intellectual capabilities became teachers. Their characteristic features were inactivity, lack of professional aspirations, abandonment of social activity and resistance to change.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM REFORM DURING THE PERIOD OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The turn of the 80s and 90s of the 20th century was a period of great political, economical and social changes in Poland. The collapse of socialism, democratization of social life, the introduction of the principles of capitalist economy and involvement of Poland in European integration processes required a quick adaptation of the education model to new conditions. The range of competence taught to students became insufficient and inadequate in the new socio-economic situation. In the era of market economy and universal access to information, an educational approach based on encyclopaedic knowledge became inadequate. Course preparation of the younger generation for the correct reception and interpretation of the processes and socio-economic changes taking place in the world around became most significant. The qualities which needed to be developed in the future citizen were: openness, creativity, innovation, an ability to function in conditions of competitiveness (Rodzoś, Charzyński 2005).

The above mentioned reasons led to the enactment of a new Law on the educational system by the Polish Parliament in 1990. Since the early 1990s programme and methodological changes have been introduced. Office for Educational Reform was created, which prepared a uniform project of a long-term education reform with the help of experts, creative teachers and the academic environment (Ministry of National Education 1998; Śliwierski 1999). A systemic education reform introduced in 1999 was the culmination of the process. The education reform in Poland was comprehensive. The changes included all the spheres of functioning of education from theoretical and philosophical basis, through structure of education, school management, organizational, programme and methodological assumptions in teaching, and principles of teacher training.

The goal of the education reform was to restore school educational and social values. The ideas of personalism and holism became the basis for a new pedagogy. The first concept indicated focusing on the students and assigning them a vital role in the educational process. It was assumed that the student, and not knowledge any more, should be the principal point of reference in writing programmes and educational content and methods selection. The student was granted the right to have autonomous views, talents and limitations. Supporting and guiding the development of a man as a person functioning with

respect to the chosen system of values became the aim of education. To prepare students for independent living was a priority task.

Adopting the philosophy of holism in teaching meant abandonment of the narrow, specialised description of the different elements of reality for a complementary approach to knowledge about the world. One of the main goals of education was to present students a coherent image of the world and explanation of phenomena and processes taking place in nature and culture. The ideas of holism influenced the perception of a student in the learning/ teaching process. One of the main slogans of the reformed school was multilateral development of a child's personality – from the physical level, through the emotional and sensory, ending with the intellectual (Jakubowski 1996; Pulinowa 2003).

The holistic concept as a methodological basis for the Polish education also influenced the organization of education. According to this concept, teaching traditional natural science subjects such as: geography, biology, chemistry and physics was abandoned in primary school, for the problem and holistic approach, which was expressed by the introduction of a subject called *science*. Interdisciplinary paths were the new form of education in all types of schools, including contents from different fields, e.g.: *Ecological Education*, *Regional Education – cultural heritage of the region* or *European Education*.

One of the more important achievements of the educational reform was de-politicizing and de-misinterpretation of the educational contents. Assumptions emphasis in the new programme was put on teaching students a variety of skills and attitudes, allowing them to function in the modern world, simultaneously resigning from an excess of factual knowledge.

A programme-textbook pluralism was something completely new in the school reality. Instead of one curriculum and one textbook for a given subject on a certain level of education, many alternative curricula and textbooks from different publishers were introduced into the educational market. It became possible to create author programmes by individual schools. The only obligatory document, regulating the selection of learning content in school curricula and textbooks was *Core Curriculum* developed by the Ministry of National Education with a high degree of generalisation allowing a relatively free interpretation of its articles.

The reform brought a breakthrough in the field of assessment of student's achievements. At the end of each of the educational stages, unknown until then in the Polish school system external examinations were introduced. The basis for the testing were examination standards including a list of expected student achievements at the end of a given educational stage. The exams became identical for students in the whole country, and state examination committees, independent from schools, became responsible for their verification. Uniform external examinations allow for comparing the quality of education in a given

region and even in the whole country. The results of an external examination carried out at the end of II^o secondary school are the basis for recruitment to higher education, and ensure equal opportunities for teenagers from different environments to study in a university chosen by them.

Decentralization of the education system was also a sign of its democratization at two levels: organizational and qualitative. The organizational decentralization consists in a partial transfer of responsibility for financing and management of schools to local governments. The qualitative decentralization was executed by admission of non-state schools functioning: non-public and private, at every level of education.

In the new education system the role of a teacher also changed. In the socialist system the teachers' primary task was to implement central guidelines, but in the new reality they had to start creating the didactic process. The modern system requires openness and readiness for a continuous development of their methodological tools. The new organizational structure of schools contributes to this as well, where the two-stage system of general education was changed into a three-stage one (primary school, junior high school and secondary school). In the situation where each stage of learning was shortened and in the face of a growing demographic depression, teachers repeatedly have to teach not one, but two or more subjects, within their regular teaching post.

A novelty in relation to the socialist system was also an introduction of career degrees and different salaries depending on the achieved level of competence. Gaining a higher degree of career requires documented, systematic training, perfecting and multifaceted professional activity as well as creativity in innovative teaching and educational solutions. At the same time introduction of career degrees necessitates continuous teacher training (the Ministry of National Education 1998).

Concluding the above considerations one should state that at least in the theoretical sphere the basic assumptions of the education reform brought a lot of good both for the student and the development of the country in democratic conditions. The modern school differs significantly from the school of the 1980s. It is more open, colourful, student-friendly and more focused on obtaining good results.

PROBLEMS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM REFORM IN POLAND

Although over 20 years have passed since the transformation of Polish educational system began, the process has still not finished and the results achieved so far are far from satisfactory. Negative opinions about the process itself and the results of the reforms are shared by many social groups: teachers and

students – the direct participants of the reform, parents, university milieu as well as independent observers of the reform.

One of the basic accusations aimed at the results of the reform of educational system is surface and badly-directed education not tailored to the needs of the labour market. Even a university diploma does not guarantee getting adequate job qualifications and a workplace. Another complaint about the reform is that it overloads students with a big amount of subjects, forcing them, at the same time, to study additionally outside of the school in order to pass external exams well and be accepted to a university they choose. And finally, the main problem is the instability of the educational system which undergoes constant changes, and as a result induces tiredness and discouragement in all those participating in the reform.

Poor efficiency of the reform of educational system is conditioned by a few factors:

- inconsequent educational policy;
- a weakly prepared basis and, at the same time, a wide range of the reform;
- social resistance against the reform;
- fictitiousness of action.

The first draft of the reform at the beginning of the 1990s was quite coherent with regard to philosophy, substance and organization, and the reform introduced in 1999 had a deep, system character. It was also first widely consulted with the society. Unfortunately, political instability typical for a young democracy caused many changes in the original scheme of the reform. Almost every of the often changing governing teams questioned certain assumptions of the reform and introduced modifications to its conception, gradually losing the meaning and the coherence of the whole enterprise. What constantly changes is: the set of subjects and the amount of their teaching time, educational standards, curriculum, books, the rules of external exams, the rules of educating teachers, etc. Many key decisions were made without asking the specialists for opinion, or sometimes against their opinion. The new ideas were also not adequately consulted with the society. In the undertaken action one can often see rather political interest than the substance-oriented need of change. The efficiency of the introduced modifications was not adequately verified, and thus the badly-functioning elements are not amended. Unpredictability became one of the features of the reform – one can even say it is constantly in the phase of experimentation. Chaos began to rule over the educational policy, the aim and the philosophy of the reform lost its transparency, and for its executors the reform became quite incomprehensible.

The range of the reform of educational system was deep and many-faceted. The reform included all the spheres in which the school functions: those concerning organization, finances, curriculum and methodology. All the changes

were introduced almost at the same time, and their scope in many cases surpassed the executors. Teachers, who were unprepared mentally and substantially, were most loaded with the new duties. They, who were brought up and educated in a socialist system, had to instantly change their style of work, choose books, and teach new subjects and new educational forms of teaching. The same problem applied to the milieus expected to support the process of the reform, i.e. methodologists and university teachers, who were also raised in the old system.

Faced already with high requirements, the contemporary teacher had to respond to the new rules of teaching pedagogues introduced by the changed standards of educating teachers valid since 2004 (MENiS regulation of 07.09.2004). The obligation of a two-subject education at university, the possibility to continue education at post-graduate studies and qualification courses (usually in a small amount of hours), and the lack of control over the efficiency of educating teachers are the main reasons why the level of their preparation with regard to substance and methodology is lower and lower.

An additional problem is the vehemence of some of the introduced solutions, e.g. with regards to books and curriculum. A huge amount of titles that appeared on the educational market makes the choice difficult for teachers and raises the problem of unifying the knowledge and abilities of students.

The characteristic feature of Polish society is distrust towards the authority and the criticism of the decisions it takes, all of which were formed in the period of communism. The concept of the reform of educational system, has from the very beginning, met with the objection of many social groups, especially of people directly concerned, i.e. teachers and parents, which made it immensely difficult to introduce changes. The situation has been reinforced by the style of communication between the authorities and the society, which was developed on the basis of old political habits, i.e. imposing decisions from above without any social consultations, informing about situations after they have already happened, and introducing the key changes at the moment when the society's attention was turned away from affairs of education (e.g. the introduction of a new curriculum by MENiS regulation took place on 23rd December 2008). As a result the distance between the authority and the society grows bigger, while among the executors of the reform appears a feeling of being excluded from the decision-making process and the lack of identification with the need for reform, which results in the lack of commitment in the authentic implementation of the reform.

Another feature of post-socialist social mentality is the domination of theory over practice, which results in the fictitiousness of certain actions. It can be also noticed in the case of the reform of educational system. Many of the very good assumptions of the reform remained formal because there were not

adequate conditions for their implementation. The between-subject paths are a good example. This new and completely unknown form of education was introduced to schools without preparing the conditions for its implementation. Schools which were obliged to introduce the new form of educating did not receive any help with regard to finances, methodology or substance, and as a result looked for adequate organizational solutions using the trial and error method. Since there were no defined rules how to account schools for the implementation of between-subject paths, many schools did not even undertake the task and implemented it only formally, preparing reports for the outside control system. The reform imposed many other tasks on schools which were mainly about overloading teachers with unnecessary bureaucracy proving the fictional activity.

The negative experiences resulting from the first stage of the reform were not taken into account by the consecutive governments. The same mistakes are made over and over again, e.g. the curriculum for secondary schools of 2008 (MENiS regulation of 23.12.2008) introduces new interdisciplinary subjects without any guidelines for their implementation.

In the modern world one of the elements of educational reforms is decentralisation of education involving different entities in the management and financing of schools: state authorities, business institutions and local governments. In the Polish reform of the educational system the division of responsibilities between the state and other entities was mainly imposed by political and economic, rather than substantive considerations. The involvement of local authorities is reduced mainly to financing schools which is a relief for the state budget. In such a situation poorer communities have problems with maintenance of the schools on an appropriate level, therefore smaller schools are closed down and extra school activities such as interest clubs and sports sections are reduced. In this way instead of reducing the differences in educational attainment for young people from richer and poorer environments, they are strengthened, which is evident in the results of external examinations. Financing education from non-budgetary sources in Poland is minimal, despite the fact that educational law makes it possible. However, no such tradition can be found in a society shaped by 45 years of centrally planned economy. There is also no link between education and the labour market, which discourages entrepreneurs from investing in the development of educational institutions and training of young people.

Apart from the financial aspects, decentralisation of education management in Poland is illusory. The scope of decisions made at the local level is low, it is limited to the recruitment of teachers and choice of school principals. The education system is primarily administered by the state represented by the Ministry of National Education, which not only does establish the education law, but

also exerts control over the quality of school functioning. Local departments of education – which play the role of regional bodies of state administration supervising teaching standards at schools are institutions dating back from the socialist period, very bureaucratic, concentrated mainly on the formal sides of education, the accuracy of school documents and records, and not on the actual effects of school work and their problems. The remainder of the previous system is also the Teachers' Charter enacted in 1981 and applicable until now – regulating the rights and duties of teachers. This document protects teachers from dismissal regardless of their attitude and achieved work results, thus limiting the freedom of the principal and the local authorities as far as human resources policy is concerned. It also provides numerous and often unjustified privileges, at the same time becoming one of the factors that inhibit progress in education.

Therefore, the transfer of supervision over schools to local governments seems to be based on pretence.

CONCLUSIONS

One could say that Poland, after the political changes, joined Europe anew, joining in its economic and political structures. To be able to function efficiently in these structures it is necessary to quickly catch up after the period of socialism in all spheres of activity while engaging in new ventures. To function under new economic and political conditions, an adequately prepared society is necessary. To educate such a society, a reformed, modern system of education is needed.

Despite the passage of more than 20 years since the beginning of the reform processes of the Polish education system, we still do not see the end of this process. It could be said that the Polish school is in a continuous phase of the experiment whose results are not verified and the newly introduced concepts are replaced by successive ones. It should be objectively stated that many positive changes were introduced, but many errors and inconsistencies were committed resulting in still unsatisfactory teaching quality and learning conditions.

The main reason of the failure of the reform lies in the social mentality shaped in the socialist system and immaturity of democracy resulting from it. Decision-makers and participants of the reform do not fully understand the role of education in the development of a modern society. Politicians use it to achieve their own goals and ambitions and those who implement it are reluctant to change and perform many mock activities. Dependence of the success of the reform on consistent operation of many social groups is one of the basic obstacles to its achievement.

The education reform overlapped with the general transformation of the socio-economic and political life of the country after the overflow of the socialist system. All the changes required enormous substantial effort and financial resources, which had to be divided among a number of spheres requiring investing in. In a country where the democratic system and market economy are in the initial stage of development, possibilities – especially financial, are limited, which makes it difficult to introduce constructive reforms.

However, while the problems of the reform financing are an objective factor and impossible to eliminate at the present stage of the state's development, inasmuch to prepare a reform concept consistent in terms of its contents and its consistent implementation is possible.

What is actually needed for the modernization of the Polish education system, which has been realized for over 20 years, to finally bring the desired results? The answer to this question is not easy. The education system reform is an arduous and lengthy process even in countries which have no major delays in adjusting education to the socio-economic situation (Kolouh-Westin 2004). Mental changes in social awareness shaped by 45 years of the socialist system are slow and not always possible to achieve, that is why the very idea of the reform is perhaps not fully understandable to the general public. For this reason, the role of the reform for the development of a democratic society must be publicized, and the mechanisms of the reform need to be explained in order for the participants of the reform to reach a state of internal belief in the need for changes and their acceptance.

A long-term strategy seems crucial to the success of the reform, introduced consistently in stages, supported by research on the effectiveness with current modification of solutions being proved incorrect. The education reform should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, without sudden, unjustified and unverified changes. An appropriate sequence of actions should also be maintained. New concepts should be subjected to reliable public consultations, and only after receiving positive feedback from experts and participants of the reform they should be put into practice. Prior to the implementation of any programme and organisational changes, teachers and the educational base should be prepared for them. The results of any changes should be subjected to a thorough analysis, and solutions that do not bring the expected results should be systematically corrected. The reform efforts must be real – only those changes that are justified and have the opportunities and conditions for their realisation should be implemented. Fictitious activities mislead the public opinion and unnecessary bureaucracy wastes the teachers' time which should be spent working with the student.

Compliance with these demands is not impossible in Polish conditions – however, it requires maturity and understanding of the education reform role

for the development of a democratic society, from all the participants of the reform, beginning with the political decision-makers ending with the changes executors.

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