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**CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES
AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY**

**СУЧАСНІ ОСВІТНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ
ТА ОСВІТНЯ ПОЛІТИКА**

Розглянуто проблеми та явища сучасної шкільної освіти Польщі, позитивні та негативні аспекти її функціонування. Зосереджено увагу на пропозиціях реформ та їх завданнях, які можна назвати стратегічними та такими, що мають на меті значні соціальні зміни в іміджі та впливі польської освітньої системи. Розкрито питання реформи освітньої системи після 1999 року, її різноманітних стратегій та несподіваних результатів, соціальних умов та наслідків освітньої кризи, маргіналізації та соціального відчуження дітей і підлітків, соціальної несправедливості сучасної школи.

Ключові слова: сучасна школа, іспит на зрілість, маргіналізація, соціальна несправедливість, діти і підлітки, Польща.

Рассмотрены проблемы и явления современной образовательной системы Польши, позитивные и негативные аспекты ее функционирования. Сосредоточено внимание на предложениях реформ и их целях, которые можно назвать стратегическими и направленными на существенные социальные изменения в имидже и влиянии польской образовательной системы. Раскрыты вопросы реформы образовательной системы после 1999 года, ее различных стратегий и неожиданных результатов, социальных условий и последствий образовательного кризиса, маргинализации и социального отчуждения детей и подростков, социальной несправедливости современной школы.

Ключевые слова: современная школа, экзамен на зрелость, маргинализация, социальная несправедливость, дети и подростки, Польша.

The problems and phenomena of the contemporary school and education in Poland, as well as positive and negative aspects of its functioning have been considered. Special attention has been paid to the reform suggestions and objectives which might be called strategic and aimed at causing significant and socially expected changes in the image and effects of Polish education system. The issues of education system reform after 1999 and its various strategies and unexpected results, education crisis's social conditions and effects, marginalisation and social exclusion of children and adolescents, contemporary school and social inequalities have been considered.



Key words: contemporary school, «matura» exam, marginalisation, social inequalities, children and adolescents, Poland.

Постановка проблеми в загальному вигляді. The education system reform initiated in 1999 was brought about, which is widely known, by the need to adjust the system to the provisions of the Polish Constitution, to the political system reform and by the necessity to eliminate or significantly reduce numerous negative phenomena which accumulated throughout the «real socialism» period and, eventually, by our attempts at integrating with the European Union.

There is no need to discuss both the motives of the reform creators and the conditions at the reform start that is the quantitative and qualitative data, concerning various education system components, as they are widely known and documented. We shall focus solely on the reform assumptions and objectives which may be called strategic and which were aimed at causing significant and socially expected changes in the image and in the effects of our education system.

These strategic objectives of the reform include:

- popularising secondary education and significantly increasing the number of university students;
- increasing the availability of education at all levels and making these opportunities equal;
- improving the quality of education, integrating the process of teaching and education.

Furthermore, the following assumptions were made: stronger bonds of school at all levels with a family and local community; making the education system more democratic; including school in the process of the civil society creation; counteracting education crisis; restructuring the existing vocational training system thoroughly and adopting it to the changing market economy needs; introducing plurality of curriculums; adopting the education system management and financing to our political system; meeting European educational challenges, introducing European education dimension.

Формулювання мети статті. The aim of this study is to indicate problems and phenomena which should be dealt with by the contemporary school and education in Poland, as well as hazards which should be avoided.

Вклад основного матеріалу дослідження.

1. Education system reform after 1999 – various strategies and unexpected results.

The objectives and tasks mentioned above were included in various staged strategies of the education development and the development plans for Poland designed by the government for years 2001–2006, 2007–2013, and also in the National Social Integration Strategy and in the State Strategy for Youth (both until 2013). The Strategy was presented also by Polska 2000 Plus Forecasting Committee at the Bureau of the Polish Academy of Sciences.



The available results of studies and assessment carried out by serious academic bodies prove that the pending reform has brought, unfortunately, numerous adverse effects and phenomena, despite the assumptions made in various strategies.

The best summary was provided by the participants of the 6th Polish Pedagogical Conference PTP in 2007 [2, p. 29]. I would like to highlight some of those conclusions.

The education reform, it was declared, has had consequences opposite to the initial assumptions which, practically, mean a negative assessment of the entire social enterprise. To support this thesis the following arguments were quoted:

- teaching/learning is subordinated to examination standards and simultaneously, the focal point is shifted from the education process to its results (the so-called teaching in line with tests);

- the function of the core curriculum (amended many times in the previous decade) has been taken over by the system of external exams, based on uniform evaluation standards;

- clear curriculum reductionism, focus on the education effect reduce the students' motivation to learn and their cognitive activity, leading to limiting the role of the school;

- schools' striving to obtain results which will ensure the highest position in rankings enhances social differentiation and inequalities in access to education [1, p. 126].

Shift of the focal point from the education process to its result is a change which has taken place in our education system slowly but steadily. Its beginnings should be sought in the seventies in the American schooling system. It was then that, allegedly as an evidence of care for the quality of education, the concept of the so-called minimum competence was introduced, determining the competence set which every student should acquire in the education process. It soon turned out, however, that schools targeted their work at what they were «evaluated» for and all the same the minimum competence in the educational practice became equivalent to the maximum competence.

Before it was discovered that this concept failed to bring anticipated effects, that it was incorrect, it was popularised also in Europe, including Poland. We, however, withdrew from this solution in the nineties, replacing the minimum competence curriculum with the so-called core curriculum which has been amended by consecutive ministers many times.

The analysis of available studies' results reveals that the name was changed but, apparently, the idea of minimum competence was retained.

The process of the Polish integration with the European Union, unfortunately, deepened those adverse phenomena in relations with the process of standardization, comprising also education, taking place in virtually all fields of our life.

This led to the determination of standards of curriculum requirements for schools of general education, vocational qualifications standards; standards of students' achievements at the end of particular education stages; standard tools for measuring those achievements; standards related to financing education system, media cover and equipping particular types of schools on various education stages, school buildings,



teachers' training and development; common EU education policy standards, related to the implementation of assumptions of the Bologna Process; polish vocational qualification framework (which actually means its standardisation) we must identify and introduce after 2010.

It should be stressed, however, that the standardization process has given rise to numerous discussions and various, frequently extreme, opinions. On the one hand it is emphasized that the standardization of curriculum requirements, measurement and students' achievements at particular education stages leads to their objectification which is important from the social point of view, and also creates grounds for comparing the achievements of students but also those of teachers and schools.

On the other hand, however, which was highlighted in the opinion of the participants of the 6th PTP conference, in the schooling practice those standards replace the core curriculum, lead to hampering the cognitive development of students, their real cognitive effort, willingness to seek solutions and presenting their own interpretation of reality which results among others in intellectual helplessness, dogmatism of thinking and conforming attitude. Consequently, the school becomes a place where facts, patterns and canons are taught [3, p. 437]. This is a perfect opposite of what the reform creators assumed and the most worrying aspect. We are coming back to the traditional school idea advocated by F. Herbart which is criticised so strongly, and not without grounds, by the representatives of the New Education Movement, active school, creative school and, last but not least, humanistic pedagogics. It turns out that history once again returned to the point of departure.

Also other standards mentioned above give rise to similar opinions. Extensive social criticism is devoted also to financing education, still so poorly provided for and treated as the area offering opportunities for saving. This is evidenced by the GDP percentage spent for education (3.05 % in 2000/2001, 3.9 % in 2008/2009), and insufficient remuneration of teachers when compared with other professional groups.

As can be expected, the greatest criticism is connected with the standards of students' achievements and standard tools for their measurement at particular education stages, especially in the Polish language and subjects from the mathematical and scientific group. This is stressed both by teachers and members of district examination boards.

A. Reszwick – teacher of Polish, connected with DEB Łomża – stresses that the «matura» exam does not promote those who understand what they read, are able to evaluate, prioritise, have their own opinion, and perceive the literary work idea and cultural processes connected with the excerpt they read. The most important tool during the Polish lessons are tests preparing for the «matura» exam, whereas the basic material are the models of activities' evaluation, adapted to the curriculum and books from the reading list. The Polish lessons are focused on copying and recreating patterns which are likely to repeat.

As for the students' achievements in the field of mathematical and scientific subjects, the experts emphasize (H. Marek, D. Mościcka) that these achievements can



be identified solely with respect to the examination requirement standards. As H. Marek wrote in this work, they fail to provide for certain competences specified in the core curriculum. Certain regularity can be perceived here, namely that in various examination subjects the students find problem solving easier when the same problems, even more difficult ones, were discussed during lessons. There are certain troubles with problems which have a non-standard structure. The students perform definitely poorly, at all education stages, when it comes to solving untypical problems. This situation has not changed as throughout the past years the examination boards' comments following the «matura» exam have been almost identical. This means that the school has not changed despite the reform postulates and assumptions.

Besides these adverse phenomena from the social and reform assumptions point of view, it is necessary to mention other, equally dangerous and undesirable, namely:

- education crisis covering all school and non-school education levels;
- marginalization and exclusion of various groups of children and adolescents;
- deepening social inequalities which are enhanced by the contemporary school;
- «recidivism» of centralized education management.

These phenomena are so important that they require a separate review.

2. Education crisis – social conditions and effects. Counteracting the educational crisis, anticipated by the reform creators, failed to bring the expected effects. This, obviously, has a more extensive background, covering the processes and phenomena which change not only Poland, but also Europe and the whole world. The most important of them is globalisation. It shapes, as we already know, all and every sphere of our life, changing the nature of our identity as it leads to the deterioration of traditional values, lifestyles and dreams, or in a more limited scope to their relativisation. In this way it changes the nature of the contemporary society.

G. Mathews, in a popular work entitled «Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket» highlights the fact that our identity turns into consumer's identity and we take only what we like from culture. This is most acute among younger generations which are clearly more and more fascinated with material goods which are corroborated by studies. The most important value is the multiplication of goods, and consequently the citizen's status is changed into consumer's one [12, p. 94; 16, p. 197]. It becomes more and more apparent that the contemporary citizen is primarily «homo oeconomicus», whose actions are guided by market reasonability and profits, while ethics is less important or neglected entirely.

These changes exert immense influence on the Polish society.

Today, both in the social and political discussions, we like to emphasize that we build (strengthen) civil society. Although its concept dates back to ancient times (Aristotle, Cicerone), it has not been understood in the same way both in theory and in practice. Among its varieties the most frequent ones are the republican model (deriving from Aristotle) and liberal, developed in Europe and the United States since the 18th century.

The basic category for both models is the «citizenship» but understood in two different ways: in the republican model it is a specific attitude towards the community



interest, whereas in the liberal tradition it is reduced to identifying specific rights and obligation of an individual.

What civil society model are we building today and what should we implement? We should target towards the one with a determined and accepted citizenship and citizen values' ethos, with the citizens perceiving their society as a civil community, based on participating democracy, having and accepting the concept of the common good, separation from the state, respecting rights and autonomy of individuals, allow individuals to choose their social, economic and political activity freely [11, p. 313].

Do we implement such a vision of society in Poland?

The foundations of the civil society in Poland created after 1990 turned out, unfortunately, non-durable and not meeting the vision of such a society fully. According to experts, this happened primarily because the society was organized in an opposition to state and most frequently, as W. Osiatyński claims, around the ideas and values and not social or economic interests [10, p. 211].

The political parties created in large numbers centred around their leaders, and frequently on their ambitions, dreams and objectives, usually discrepant, which made it impossible to identify both the common good concept and the mechanisms of implementing the civil society idea. The additional factor hampering this process were the social and business contacts and relations of those leaders with the people from the former political system [9, p. 210; 16, p. 200].

Disputes over the character of the modern civil society in Poland and also, as mentioned before, all the failures experienced during its creation, are transferred into the civic education.

The major objective of the civic education must be, as I have already mentioned, development of the active citizenship, aimed primarily at teaching democratic values, shaping social, civic and patriotic attitudes, and most importantly, at dialogue and discourse which give vent to emotions and experiences, which develop and enrich the mind.

It is vital that the values underlying the civic education are internalized by the adolescents as their own, and that they result from a conscious and unrestrained choice, without being imposed in an arbitrary way. The special position must be taken by such values as freedom (of thinking, speaking, acting), getting acquainted with their own and other individuals' rights, respect for law, equality of opportunities, responsibility, common good, individual and national identity and participating democracy which should be visible in the practice of mutual relations and activities of citizens and which should also take part in creating their ethics of duty and civil awareness.

The objectives and tasks of the civic education mentioned above should be implemented primarily by school. This takes place during various subjects at various education level (History and society, Civics, Culture, the so-called education paths, Regional education, Polish culture on the background of the Mediterranean one).

The analysis of the core curriculum leads, however, to a conclusion than none of the assumed effects of the civic education is related to attitudes but solely to knowledge and abilities [1, p. 127].



The effects of the civic education perceived in this way indicate, first of all, the failure to understand its nature and essence, and secondly, are reflected in the social image of school.

Surveys carried out by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) for the representative group of adult citizens of Poland in May 2007 prove that among all the functions of the Polish school the social function is evaluated with greatest criticism, highlighting poor preparation of the young generation to take part in creating the civil society. These negative opinions prevail in such important issues as adolescents' preparation to participate in social and political life actively, preparation to a family life, preparation to cope with problems encountered in the contemporary life. Over two-fifths of the survey subjects believe that schools fail to perform these tasks (CBOS, June 2007).

The available results of other studies concerning the function of the contemporary school indicate that at present we have a growing inflow of primitive mass culture standards and consumer attitudes of the adolescents, with a fascinating rule of «possess», loss of any more refined feelings, of moral sensitivity, and books, literary and aesthetic culture being «expelled» from schools, as well as with an excessively slow rebirth of the labour ethos and values related thereto: responsibility, self-reliance, reliability and innovativeness in the Polish society [2, p. 31].

There is no need to convince anyone that these are phenomena dangerous from the social point of view which the school, unfortunately, is unable to counteract efficiently. This is what we call the neglected areas of education.

These areas include also adolescents' addiction to psychoactive substances (beer, wine, vodka and other strong alcohols, and drugs).

The research carried out by CBOS (2008) for the Polish Bureau for Combating Drug Abuse (Biuro ds. Przeciwdziałania Narkomanii) revealed that the situation in this field is highly worrying.

In 1992–2008 beer consumption rose especially drastically – from 49 % (1992) to 75 % in 2008. Another alarming issue is the increase in the abuse of strong alcohols (vodka and other). If in 1992 it was reported that 30% adolescents tried them, in 2008 this was 54 % of respondents.

In 1992–2008 also the number of students declaring drug abuse grew: from 5 % in 1992 to about 15 % in 2008 (the highest level of adolescents' taking drugs, reaching about 24 %, was reported in 2003). It should be stressed that the contact with drugs (this includes also isolated consumption), especially hash and cannabis, was reported by 30.5 % of respondents in 2008 and during 12 months preceding the survey – 16.4 % of adolescents, whereas during 30 days preceding the survey – 7.4 % (CBOS, January 2009).

The level of consumption of the psychoactive substances mentioned above depends, to a greater or lesser degree, on gender, school type, social situation variables, environment, school achievements of the adolescents surveyed, and eventually on the level of their religious faith.



The pathological phenomena, obviously, are rooted in various pedagogical omissions of the contemporary school and also in the erroneous social policy of the state.

3. Marginalisation and social exclusion of children and adolescents.

Marginalisation and social exclusion are phenomena covering various groups and are not typical solely of Poland. Their scope is extensive and versatile in various EU countries. In the conclusions of the Commission of the European Communities of January 2008 it was stated, among others, that 19 million out of 78 million exposed to the risk of poverty are children. 10 % of them live in household with no active breadwinner, and 60 % of them are exposed to the risk of poverty. According to the information included in this report, the exposure to the risk of poverty among children in Poland is the highest in EU and reaches 26 % [15, p. 94], though it is different in various part of Poland: the lowest in Mazovia, Silesia, Lesser and Greater Poland, and the highest in Świętokrzyskie, Pomerania, Cuiavia and Pomerania and in the voivodeship of Lubusz. The available empirical data prove that marginalization and social exclusion of children and adolescent is related primarily to poverty experienced by a growing number of citizens.

According to GUS research this is most visible in large families. In 2008 it afflicted about 18 % people from families with four and more children, 9 % of families with three children, 8 % of single mothers and fathers with dependent children [15, p. 95].

It is worth using this occasion to stress that poverty is one of large-scale social problems. According to E. Tarkowska, the extreme poverty afflicts about 10–12 % inhabitants of Poland (this refers to people who live below the so-called living wage which was 387 PLN in 2004), while about 18 %, that is almost one fifth of our society, live in moderate poverty which entitles them to obtain social assistance benefits (social assistance benefits can be used by people whose income does not exceed the so-called subsistence level (in 2004 this was 479 PLN per capita)). If we add this to 23 % of those declaring they hardly manage to «make ends meet» (the so-called subjective poverty, 941 PLN for a single-person household), then it can be inferred that almost one half of the society experiences extreme, moderate or subjective poverty [15, p. 98]. This must be perceived as alarming as afflicts children to the greatest degree – their existence, but most of all their development and education process, especially in rural areas.

The poverty scale globally is even more dramatic. According to F. Mayor, about 1/5 of the entire population of Earth live in extreme poverty (daily income lower than 2 USD per capita) whereas 2/3 (daily income 2–4 USD per capita). This, obviously, depends on the region and part of the world and has no uniform character [7, p. 16].

It is similar in Poland as poverty strikes both rural and urban areas but is not evenly distributed or concentrated. In greater cities it strikes districts, blocks, streets afflicted with high unemployment level, poverty, pathological phenomena, whereas in rural areas it strikes primarily regions which traditionally represent low development level (e.g. former areas occupied by the State Agricultural Farms and the so-called Eastern Wall). It is clear that the reasons for poverty are hard to enumerate, but let us



concentrate here on the after-effects of this phenomenon which, as I have already mentioned, strikes primarily children.

The empirical data, according to M. Bogdaj, provided primarily by the Institute of Labour and Social Affairs [15], Council for Social Monitoring (Social Diagnosis 2007), research carried out by sociologists [4] and education sociologists [6], as well as international research reveal that the most dangerous of poverty after-effects is the phenomenon of the intergeneration consolidation of poverty in families threatened with it, and also inheriting poverty and recreating by the children of poor parents both their paths of life and also their social positions [3, p. 437].

It should also be stressed that children from poor families are frequently better visible in their school environment as they differ from their peers in their appearance, lack of books, of school accessories, frequently also lack of any breakfast, absence during any school trips and other events etc.

These differences bring about marginalisation and isolation of poor children in peer group, frequently resulting in playing truant, avoiding school, exposing pathological behaviours and, consequently, school failures and, eventually, falling behind.

These after-effects obviously have a wider background. As J. Michalski rightly claims, poor families are frequently threatened with disintegration in the form of highly popular alcohol abuse, aggression, negligence with respect to children, weakening the control and emotional function, and also absolute helplessness. The feeling of danger and helplessness leads among others to specific attitudes, lifestyles and behaviours called the subculture of poverty [8, p. 32].

E. Tarkowska rightly claims that the «drama» of children and adolescents' poverty in the Polish conditions lies primarily in the danger of consolidating poverty and negative phenomena associated with it, in recreation of mechanisms closing in the circle of poverty, unemployment, renunciation and permanent marginalisation in consecutive generations [14, p. 13].

S. Golinowska, a coordinator of the programme called «Polish Poverty III», stresses that education is one of the most important institutions in the social life, which should play the leading role in combating and counteracting marginalisation of children and adolescents. Unfortunately, as revealed by the studies led by her, school does not fulfil its role related to combating poverty well, and even stigmatizes poor children and makes it difficult to overcome defects and deprivation. This happens because the education policy preferences focus unilaterally on the educational function. This is why, as S. Golinowska emphasizes, school has to not only feed children, but also create opportunities for developing their interests, being a place where bonds are created and personalities shaped. It will not be possible to combat poverty and social exclusion of children and adolescents efficiently unless the pedagogical and social function are undertaken with respect to children in difficult situation [5, p. 293]. The implementation of those functions raises numerous critical comments at present.

4. Contemporary school – reduction or strengthening of social inequalities.

The thesis that education strengthens inequalities instead of levelling them is not new



and does not apply solely to Poland. It was stressed in well-known international reports, such as the one by J. Delors (1998) or F. Mayor (2001) which clearly indicates also that the educational policy may become the additional factor contributing to social exclusion of children and adolescents.

This strengthening of educational inequalities is called by F. Mayor an embodiment of the social splitting of the contemporary school or even school apartheid. This proves that as much as 20–30 % of students get stuck in the traps of access to schooling whereas education is subject to logic which encourages more privileged classes to isolate their children in «good schools» and to globalize their chances by means of supranational school and university careers. Simultaneously, education is expected to «manage school failures and award diplomas devaluated on the labour market» [7, p. 14].

J. Delors emphasizes also that school failures, especially those where the practices of using school achievement criteria are popular, become irreversible and frequently lead to marginalisation and social exclusion of students. He also highlights that even in countries with highly developed expenditures on education, school failures strike a significant percentage of children and adolescents, and later transfer to employment, leading to splitting them into two groups: those who have a chance to find a job (as they got diplomas) and those standing no chance (as they do not have diplomas). Some of them, according to J. Delors, are treated by the society as «incapable of finding a job» and henceforth they get permanently excluded from the world of work and opportunities for social integration. All the same school failures generate exclusions and become source of new forms of violence and social pathology.

Similar processes and phenomena are encountered also in Poland. They were emphasized in the works by e.g. M. Szymański, K. Szafraniec, Z. Kwieciński, M. Marody, M. Zahorska, H. Domański.

Z. Kwieciński stresses that right at the very beginning of primary school there are numerous factors which strongly pre-condition further fate and mental level of students. This is the place of residence of parents and location of the school (The studies were carried out in 1998 and comprised 7000 adolescents). At the entrance to vocational schools there was an exclusive selection, excluding to the margin of culture. This process was brought about by the fact that these schools admitted primarily adolescents with very poor basic cultural competence [6, p. 80].

The conclusion drawn by him from the studies is not only alarming but also still up-to-date: «... trwały związek pomiędzy niskim statusem rodziców a wchodzeniem przez ich dzieci w obszar nędzy kulturowej ma charakter nierozzerwalnej spirali wykluczenia kulturowego i społeczno-zawodowego, wykluczenia sprzęgniętego z wyłączeniem świadomości jego «ofiar» («The permanent relation between low status of parents and their children entering the cultural poverty zone is a kind of an unbreaking spiral of cultural and socio-professional exclusion, exclusion coupled with the reduction of its «victims» consciousness») [13, p. 136].

Let us turn attention to the fact that the effect of social transformation in Poland following 1990 was a growing availability of secondary and university education. The



number of students getting their «matura» diploma grew. At the same time, however, which should be the object of special care and attention, acute marginalisation strikes, according to M. Zahorska, students who failed to graduate from secondary schools awarding «matura». This group is about 10 % of adolescents aged 17–19 [17, p. 111].

Finally, it is worth emphasizing certain changes in access to education depending on the social background factors. According to H. Domański, these changes can be divided into 2 periods. In the nineties, the intensified relation between social background and the transition to the secondary schools was clearly visible. The coefficient of correlation between the father's professional category and attending secondary school was 0.37 and 0.23–0.24 at the time of transition from secondary school to the university.

Since 2004, the influence of background factors at both educational thresholds decreases, with the coefficient falling to 0.23 while at transition from secondary school to university – to 0.16. The availability of education becomes greater in relation to the environmental factors [4, p. 81].

In this study I also signalled certain phenomena encountered by contemporary schools. It is not easy to minimise them. They must be, however, considered by contemporary education policy.

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