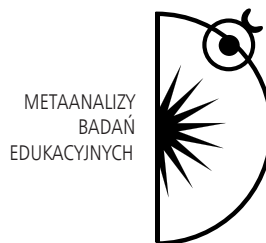


Przegląd Badań Edukacyjnych Educational Studies Review

ISSN 1895-4308
nr 29 (2/2019), s. 141–153



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Polish Society in the Face of Contemporary Changes in the Education System

<http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/PBE.2019.021>

Abstract:

The article discusses the role and significance of knowledge and education in the contemporary Polish society and presents the changes in the national education system from the perspective of successive reforms and their social perception. Particular attention was paid to the last reform of the education system – from December 2016, which since the beginning of work on it has aroused a lot of social emotions and caused controversies and has not ceased to cause them more than a year after it was in force. The authors of the article draw attention to the need to adapt curricula and teaching methods to contemporary realities, but also emphasize the dangers of introducing socially controversial changes to the education system that cause objections among citizens, especially parents of school-age children.

Key words: education, education system, public opinion, knowledge-based society.

Introduction

An important element of the knowledge-based society is education, the main aim of which is not only to pass on knowledge to people in a lifelong learning process, to shape their skills and attitudes, but above all to provide them with

help and support in the pursuit of self-fulfillment. A special role is played by school education, the key task of which is to prepare future generations to live and work in the world of dynamic social and cultural changes and accelerated progress of civilization. However, it is not an easy task to develop young people's ability to function efficiently and constructively in a complex, constantly transforming and difficult reality. Achieving this goal requires not only raising the standards and the level of efficiency of educational systems, but also supporting all school units in coping with changes in the global and local labor market (Gerlach, 2017, p.12). Therefore, education for the future requires a multidimensional view in different perspectives, aspects and contexts.

In view of the development of societies, education is the most valuable resource and generator of economic growth, and it contributes to the intensive growth of research and scientific development, thus enabling new products and more and more modern technologies to be put into use. Through the development of human capital, education determines the development of society and becomes the basis for *knowledge-based economy* (Adamowicz, Kmiecinski, 2016). On the other hand, knowledge - as a strategic resource of societies and organizations - determines their position, competitiveness, development and survival (Trajer, Paszek, Iwan, 2012). The importance of knowledge-based intangible assets is growing worldwide, which makes them a source of competitive advantage (Wyrozębski, Juchnowicz, Metelski, 2012). It is not surprising, therefore, that the development of education is an important subject of national policies and policies of wider structures, including, among others, the European Union. The Lisbon Strategy treats building this type of economy as a method of increasing the competitiveness of the market for European goods and services. However, its development requires a constant presence of highly qualified employees and continuous improvement of their competences, enabling the growth of innovation (Kowalczyk, 2009). It also requires the development of superior competences, the characteristic feature of which is both readiness for change and active participation in their creation and, what is more, in solving problems resulting from the confrontation of the new social and economic order with the existing one (Kwiatkowski, 2018, p. 27).

Considering the above, one of the main tasks of state governments is to provide their citizens with an effective and appropriate education, because only „(...) the proper education of the society is a guarantee of prosperity and long-term development of the country. All presently highly developed and developing countries appreciate the importance of education and, consequently, allocate significant funds from their budgets to education in order to ensure the highest

possible quality of the knowledge provided. Creating an effective educational system is therefore a challenge for state institutions” (Adamowicz, Kmiecinski, 2016, pp. 39–40).

Poland is no exception in this respect. In addition to increasing financial investment in education to increase the efficiency of the education system, further reforms are being implemented, covering both structural changes and changes to the core curricula and the content and forms of the provided knowledge. However, as it turns out, not all of the implemented changes have resulted and result in enthusiasm among the general public. Some are perceived as not working in practice, while others, although supported in terms of their assumptions, are criticized for, among other things, the way they are prepared and implemented.

The main aim of the article is to discuss the role and significance of knowledge and education in the contemporary Polish society and to present the changes made in the national education system from the social perspective, especially the perspective of parents of school-age children. However, we are particularly interested in the latest system reform – from December 2016, which since the beginning of work on it has aroused a lot of emotions and caused controversies and has not ceased to cause them more than a year after it was in force. The article is based on the results of empirical research carried out in the years 1994–2018 by the Social Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej – CBOS) on representative samples of adult Poles.

1) Value of training and education in the opinion of the Polish society

The systemic and economic transformations after 1989 connected with the introduction of the free market economy caused changes in the demand on the labor market and influenced the perception of the importance of education and educational aspirations of Poles. The conviction that it was worthwhile to study was already dominant in the society at the beginning of the 1990s. According to CBOS research, in 1993 76% of adult Poles expressed such an opinion, 42% of which had no doubts about it. Over time, the percentage of those convinced of the need for an education increased, assuming a record value of 93% in 2004, of which three out of four Poles (76%) identified themselves firmly with this thesis. In the following years, however, a gradual devaluation of education was observed, related to the increase in the en-masse nature of higher education, a trend which – according to research – has slowed down in recent years. In

the CBOS survey of May 2017, 86% of the respondents declared the need for getting an education, including 56% declaring it in a decisive manner. The opposite opinion was expressed by every ninth respondent (11%). Therefore, the percentages are higher than in the previous survey – performed in 2013, but still lower than in 2002–2009 (Głowacki, 2017).

The educational aspirations of parents concerning their own children also testify to the attractiveness of education. According to cyclical CBOS research, since the beginning of the 1990s, the vast majority of Poles have preferred their sons and daughters to graduate from universities with at least an engineer's, bachelor's or master's degree (in recent years this percentage has been at the level of about 85%) (Głowacki, 2017).

The declarations resulting from the research concerning the attractiveness of education and educational aspirations are, what is important, translated into practice. According to OECD estimates from 2016, as many as 42% of young Poles have commenced or will commence their master's studies in the future, which is the highest value among all analyzed countries (OECD, 2016). According to the data from the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny – GUS) from 2016, 25% of the population over 12 years of age holds a higher education degree already, which means an increase by 11 percentage points within eleven years (GUS, 2017). Although the increasing availability of higher education is a positive phenomenon, it carries the risk of devaluation of the university diploma, as well as a decrease in the level of education. What is more, such threats are perceived as real in the Polish society. The vast majority of Poles notice the process of popularization of studying and admit that today virtually anyone can study at universities, hence – for example – more than half of the respondents support the ministerial limitation of the number of students per one lecturer, which in their opinion may have a positive impact on the quality of education (Głowacki, 2017).

The devaluation of education is also observed in cyclical studies concerning the system of values of Poles. They show that in the years 2005–2013 education dropped in this hierarchy from 7th to 9th position – from 13% of indications in 2005 to 9% in 2013 (Boguszewski, 2013). The persistence of a high level of aspirations and appreciation of education by Poles and, on the other hand, their perceived devaluation of university diplomas and the postulated need to improve the quality of education proves that Poles are quite critical in expressing their views on education and the changes in its scope – both structural and substantive, of which there have been many after 1989.

2) The education system in Poland – changes over time

Until the early 1990s, compulsory education in Poland covered children attending an 8th grade primary school. At all stages of education, it was unproductive education, aimed at passing on encyclopedic knowledge to students. When the political transformation began in 1989, work began on the reform of education, adapting the forms of education to the changing social and economic reality and labor market (Szyszka, 2010). Modifications introduced on the basis of the Act of September 7, 1991 on the educational system (with later changes) transformed the hitherto structure of the system (Ślusarz, 1999). For almost a decade until the 1999/2000 school year, graduates of an 8-year primary school could continue their education in secondary schools: 4-year general secondary school, 4–5-year vocational technical school, 4-year vocational or technical secondary school and 3-year basic vocational school. In the last year of education, secondary and technical school pupils could take the secondary school final exam, and those who failed the secondary school final exam or were not admitted to universities were able to continue their education in post-secondary schools.

Under the Act of 8 January 1999, the educational system underwent a radical transformation. The compulsory education was extended by one year, primary school education was shortened from 8 to 6 years, a 3-year middle school was introduced, and a group of post-middle schools including secondary schools (including specialized secondary schools), technical schools and vocational schools, was isolated. Graduates of middle schools, after passing the compulsory external examination conducted by the district examination board, could continue their education in: a three-year basic vocational school, a three-year general secondary school, a four-year technical secondary school, a post-secondary school for persons with secondary education (maximum 2.5 years), a three-year special school adapting to work for students with moderate or severe mental disabilities and for students with multiple disabilities. Subsequent amendments to the Act included, among others, modifications concerning i.a.:

the introduction of a compulsory one-year pre-school preparation for children aged 6 (from September 2004);

1. replacement of the entrance exams for higher education with the external matura exam (since May 2005);
2. the introduction of a compulsory one-year pre-school preparation for children aged 5 (from September 2011);
3. a temporary lowering of the compulsory schooling age (from September 2014 it covered the first half of the class of 6-year-olds, from September

2015 it covered the whole class of 6-year-olds, and from December 2015 the compulsory starting age has been raised again to 7 years).

The latest amendments are related to the introduction of the Act of December 14, 2016, which fundamentally changes the structure of Polish education in force since January 1999 and the Act of October 27, 2017 on the financing of educational tasks. An 8-year primary school has been introduced and the phaseout of middle schools has begun, which will eventually cease to exist on August 31, 2019, while post-middle schools will continue to function until they are transformed into post-primary and art schools in the new education system.

It should be stressed that the reform currently being implemented is basically consistent with the assumptions of the pre-1999 education system. After the implementation of the changes provided for in the Act is completed, the education system in Poland will consist of the following structural elements¹:

- **compulsory 8-year primary school**, divided into the following stages: the first stage – grades I to III (integrated early childhood education) and the second stage – grades IV to VIII;
- **post-primary schools** (high schools and post-high schools): general education high school (4 years), technical high school (5 years), first degree vocational school (3 years), special school providing occupational preparation (3 years), second degree vocational school (2 years, a continuation of the first degree vocational school) and post-high school education (2.5 years) for persons with high school education or vocational school education.

The current forms of compulsory education, which may be carried out in Poland or abroad and at the diplomatic representation of another country in Poland², will be maintained:

- **annual pre-school preparation**,
- **obligation to study**, which begins at the age of 7 and continues until the completion of primary school, but not beyond the age of 18;
- **compulsory education** up to the age of 18, carried out in a post-middle school or as part of occupational preparation at a workplace, and additionally, a student who has completed education in a post-middle school before the age of 18 may also fulfill the obligation to study by attending classes at a higher education institution.

¹ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-education-system-and-its-structure-56_pl.

² Ibidem.

Starting from the school year 2018/2019, two external exams will be in force: the general, external eighth grade exam and the matura exam.

3) The education system in the eyes of the society

The success of educational reforms depends to a large extent on the support given by society and, in particular, by the groups personally concerned, i.e. teachers, students and parents. The analysis of the results of social research carried out by the Social Opinion Research Center in the years 1994–2018 suggests that not all ideas introduced into the education system by successive reformers were enthusiastically received by the society, and their functioning was not always assessed positively.

The changes to the education system that took place in the 1990s, starting from the adoption of the Act of September 7, 1991 on the education system, met with a fairly good public reception, although the issues of taking over schools by local governments, the lack of clarity as to the principles of subsidizing of education by the central budget and the unclear division of remits between educational authorities and communes in relation to schools taken over by a commune arose some controversies. However, generally speaking, a positive assessment of the education system of the time dominated in the society. Among its strengths Poles included highly-qualified teaching staff, high level of education, guaranty of religious education and cooperation with parents, as well as patriotic education. On the other hand, such important issues as preparing students to cope with life's problems, developing the ability to cooperate, work together, family life education and preparation to active participation in the social life of the local and national environment, as well as guaranty of students' personal safety, protection against drug addiction and violence were critically assessed (Wciórka, 1998). In the context of these deficits, over time, a general social belief of a need for a thorough educational reform arose. Poles also demanded, i.a., that secondary school and higher education be generally available.

The initial concept of changes proposed by the Ministry of National Education at the beginning of 1998 met with large social approval. The project of rewarding teachers according to their qualifications and the quality of their work has gained quite a common and relatively strong acceptance. Similar, but less strong support was given to other proposals (Wciórka, 1998):

- making vocational training pathways more open by reforming it in such a way that vocational school graduates can continue their education in the post-graduate secondary schools leading to the matura exam;

- making the new matura exam the basis for recruitment for colleges and universities;
- a comprehensive reform of curricula.

The ideas of dividing the management of public schools between commune and district local governments, the introduction of middle schools and the creation of a school-independent system of assessment and examination of students, were also accepted by the majority of the society, but were received less enthusiastically (Wciórka, 1989).

Following the introduction of the first reform measures in schools in accordance with the Act of January 1999, public support for school reform increased. The introduced curriculum changes and the introduction of middle schools as a new element in the education system gained additional supporters. Respondents expected that due to the reform young people would, above all, receive better education and be better prepared to actively participate in the social life at the local and national level, learn how to cooperate and cope with present day reality. On the other hand, there was less support for the new principles of financing schools and transferring their management to local governments. Pessimism prevailed in the assessment of the impact of the reformed school on the upbringing of the young generation, in the issue of equal educational opportunities for young people from rural areas (mainly from poor families) and reduction of the threat of unemployment of young people (Wciórka, 2000). Concerns in this respect were justified inasmuch as in the first months of the new education system being in effect, Poles perceived problems related to the implementation of the reform three times more often than its successes (19% against 6%). Respondents surveyed by the Social Opinion Research Center mostly emphasized the difficulties related to the creation of a new network of schools (including those related with the liquidation of schools, localizing and zoning), as well as the commuting of students to educational facilities. They also emphasized the lack or insufficiency of financial resources for the reform and education, drew attention to inadequate facility conditions in schools, the lack of separate buildings for middle schools, the lack of adequate classroom equipment, as well as the new grading system and problems with textbooks and the competences of the teaching staff (Wciórka, 2000).

Subsequent years of the reform were associated with an increase in social dissatisfaction with the functioning of the education system and contributed to an increasingly critical assessment of the reform and its impact. Two years after the introduction of the changes, the percentage of people negatively assessing the system increased from 31% to 42%, and 38% of respondents stated that it

functions worse than before the 1999 reform (only 18% of respondents stated otherwise). Poles mostly shared the belief that schools do not prepare students sufficiently for family life, to cope with modern life's problems, they do not shape the competences necessary for active participation in the life of the local community, as well as in the social and political life of the country. Above all, however, they do not reduce social differences and do not equalize life opportunities for children and youth from various social and educational backgrounds (Wciórka, 2001).

The results of the 2005 study, in which for the first time the so-called new matura was passed by the first year of graduates of the reformed secondary schools, were also extremely critical. The majority of adult Poles surveyed at that time by the Social Opinion Research Center, including people who had contact with the contemporary secondary school graduates, expressed the conviction that the education reform did not change anything or even had a negative effect on the implementation of the basic task of preparing graduates to function constructively in society (Wciórka, 2005). Although in the following years the functioning of the education system and the level of teaching in Polish schools began to be perceived more positively, despite a relatively positive assessment of the basic areas of the functioning of schools and improved opinion about them, more than half of Poles postulated the introduction of changes in education. Only one fifth of respondents did not see such a necessity (Wciórka, 2007).

There have been new amendments to the Act of 1991, including those related to the controversial reform of lowering the compulsory school age from seven to six years, which was introduced despite the fact that ever since the idea first appeared in the public debate until the reform was implemented, the majority of Poles, including the majority of parents of children affected by these changes, were against these changes (Smoczyńska, 2005; Boguszewski, 2008; Gendźwił, 2009; Kowalczyk, 2013; Smoczyńska, 2014). A 2014 survey conducted among parents and teachers gave slightly different results. The survey was conducted after one year of six-year-olds' participation in school education³, but before the introduction of a reduced compulsory school age. It turned out that although three quarters of the surveyed teachers were convinced about the readiness of 6-year-old children to begin school education, only one third of

³ The survey, carried out in June 2014 on a nationwide sample, covered teachers and parents of 6-year-old children, who in the school year 2012/13 started their education in the first year of primary school.

the surveyed parents expressed such a belief. In spite of this, about three quarters of parents maintained that their decision to voluntarily send their 6-year-olds to school was a valid one. (Nowak, Krawczyk, 2014). The planned change lowering the compulsory school age has been implemented and from September 2014 six-year-old children (those born in the first half of the year, and from September 2015 the whole year) started education in the first year of primary school.

The new government appointed in 2015 restored the compulsory school age from the age of 7, and left the decision about sending the child to school earlier to the parents, but also introduced other – already mentioned earlier – radical structural and curricular changes in the Polish education system, e.g. by eliminating middle schools and restoring compulsory 8-year primary school.

Although the direction of the proposed changes in the education system was described as appropriate before the introduction of the reform (51% of those surveyed by the Social Opinion Research Center in 2017 who had heard of the reform plans were of the opinion that their assumptions were correct), the opinions on how to reform the education system were strongly divided – the percentage of respondents who had hopes, rather than fears, and those who felt the opposite in this respect were of similar value. Concerns about the reform of education were related, among other things, to the belief that it had not been well prepared (as stated by 44% of the respondents several months before the introduction of the reform, only 28% were of the opposite opinion) (Boguszewski, Głowacki, 2017).

In spite of these doubts and the rather popular endorsement of Poles to submit the reform of education to a referendum (Głowacki, 2017), the new educational law entered into force as part of the standard procedure and after an exceptionally short time of its preparation and making. One year after the introduction of the reform, as it turns out, the doubts have not disappeared. Although Poles, regardless of whether they attended middle school or not, most commonly believe that the education system with an eight-year primary school, a four-year general secondary school and a five-year technical school is better than before (with a six-year primary school, a three-year middle school, a three-year secondary school and a four-year technical secondary school), the **belief that current education system functions better than before the reform is no longer so widespread (34% of all respondents)**. This is due to the fact that a **significant number of Poles believe that the reform, although justified in the assumptions, has been poorly prepared (40% of indications) and incorrectly implemented (36%)**. Particularly critical in this respect are those who

have personally encountered problems resulting from the implementation of the reform in schools located near their place of residence (Boguszewski, 2018). In addition, the reform, which certainly does not serve its popularity, is strongly entangled in the political context, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that its effects are perceived to a large extent through the prism of party preferences. The Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party's supporters speak positively about the discussed aspects of the reform, while the legitimacy of the changes introduced, especially the preparation of the reform and the manner of its implementation, are mainly criticized by potential voters of opposition groups, including especially Platforma Obywatelska, Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej and Nowoczesna (Boguszewski, 2018).

Summary

In European countries, education systems are diverse and vary in their effectiveness. In countries which are the most successful in this respect, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium Denmark and Finland (Mościbrodzka, 2014; Rabczuk, 2014)⁴, teaching varies both in terms of organization and teaching methods. What unites these countries is consistency and stability. Compared to other European countries, education in Poland does not seem to be „backward” (Polish students are of note in international rankings), but rather unstable. One might even get the impression that by introducing their own ideas to modernize the education system, successive governments are “experimenting” in a way, which unfortunately, does have an impact on the quality of teaching.

Undoubtedly, it is necessary to create a coherent and consistent education system, which would allow future generations of young Poles to compete with their foreign peers in the field of education, and then on the job market. Frequent and simultaneously underdeveloped and hastily implemented changes to the education system are certainly not conducive to this, which can be deduced from the social evaluation of the last reform – one year after its introduction. Although the assumptions are correct, in the opinion of Poles it turned out to be underdeveloped and chaotically implemented.

The Polish society must become an innovative and competitive society with a pro-market attitude, which means that the Polish economy – in accordance with global trends – should increasingly be based on knowledge. In this

⁴ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/home_en.

context, taking into account all of the mistakes and successes to date, and at the same time the positive experiences of other countries, it is necessary to develop effective and non-political solutions in the education system (both in terms of its organization and curriculum) and to transfer them in an appropriate and thoughtful way to the sensitive field of education, bearing in mind the welfare of children and young people above all, as they constitute the basic social capital of the country.

It seems important in this context to increase the scope of participation in education. According to the social demands that have been appearing since the beginning of the reform of the educational system in Poland, it is necessary to further increase the influence of teachers, parents and students not only in terms of achieving educational goals, but also in terms of creating new solutions in the educational system.

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