



Quo vadis Polish Education ?

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Abstract

Democracy is one of heterogeneous and, at the same time, ambiguous beings which make up a set of phenomena that can be observed in many modern societies. Since the dawn of time pedagogy has been dealing with public matters and interests connected with people or institutions which wielded power or authority over students or those who are involved in socialization and education processes. Thus, particularly now – after so many years of social and political transformation of the Third Republic of Poland, it must define its contribution to those transformations and express its opinion on democracy and its relationships with teaching sciences and art of education. Studies on relationships among pedagogy, social and political processes should have a crucial meaning not only for scientists but also for those exercising power so that they can answer the question: Where is Polish education going to? Is there in Polish education any place for democracy as a value, so for: participation, justice, equality, making joint decisions, working in teams, cooperation, division of authority, enhancement of social roles, mutual respect, diversity and variety?

Keywords: theory of education, system of education, educational politics, educational macro policy, democracy.

Introduction

I am trying to find an answer to the question: Is Polish educational policy involved in the process of democratization of the society and its own institutions? Since Poland regained its political sovereignty, educational goals described in the Act on Education (1991) have been treated as something obvious. Yet, paradoxically, they are not consistently realized. “Educational subjects (legislative, control and executive) are not obliged to realize any goals under the Act on Education “(Król, Kuzior, Łyszczarz 2009, p. 13). The above act only suggests that they should realize the following goals: make the school provide each student with possibility to develop, prepare each student to fulfil family and social duties bearing in mind principles of solidarity, democracy, tolerance, justice and liberty. However, the educational system is centrally controlled although it is said to be autonomous. Contrary to basic upbringing principles applied in democratic societies, school has become an institution which is conformed to the state and its authority and not to its students, teachers and other local groups (Śliwerski, 2009, 2015).

A Review of Democratization Process of Polish Educational System

Golden Age and Transformation

“The Golden Age” of the Polish school, educational system, including teachers of the Third Republic of Poland, was very short as it lasted only until the year 1991, that is the time when the first post-socialist act on the educational system was passed. Then, the social and political transition was accompanied by a genuine revival of the Polish school, all its segments required for its proper functioning in the last decade of the 20th century. It was a period of romantic hope, granted by Prof. H. Samsonowicz, the Minister of Education, for the first time - detotalitarized education. It was a time of hope for regaining education not for the next ruling party, political parties and disputes over possible indoctrination of the society, but hope for young generations, their teachers and parents. The school of the transformation period was supposed to stop being an institution of a non-democratic state, striving to liberate itself from new forms of political and ideological domination, and turn towards humanism, dialogue and democracy. The idea of a school institution was to maximize development potential in all students, help them to achieve the greatest possible success and enhance

culture capital. All these elements were supposed to help students become successful in their future life (Śliwerski 2015, Szymański 2008).

Change proposals often encountered resistance of politicians. Also teachers and trade union officials were unwilling towards the changes and even sabotaged them. Continually, destabilization accompanied a revolutionary approach; attempts to introduce reforms meshed with the evolutionary nature of changes. The choice of these phenomena depended on preferences of particular governments so they were different for a different ruling party. What had been decreased, enriched or highlighted by predecessors was later increased, depleted or ignored by their political successors. A reform of the central subject, i.e. the Ministry of Education, was not taken into consideration. Politicians who exercised power in that period followed a principle that said that bureaucracy does not reform itself, but maintains the status quo and even extends the sphere of particular benefits of the ruling fraction. Institutions of public education should be “a flywheel” of social, constitutional, cultural and economic transformations of the country but in this case they were change inhibitors, i.e. they delayed the transformations. Despite legal premises which were introduced into the educational legislation, tremendous efforts and underground struggle of prominent representatives of culture, science and education in Poland when the country was still a socialist one, were never appreciated or properly used over the long transformation period.

Research on Educational Macro Policy

Scientific studies on educational macro policy in Poland which I have been conducting for above thirty years allow me to draw conclusions that education is orientated mainly towards teaching about democracy and for democracy but not in a democratic way. Such an approach is also an element of “a mysterious programme” of the Polish educational system, according to which theocratic methods should be applied in the process of teaching about democracy and for democracy. The above approach ignores a genuine involvement and experiencing democratic processes and results of these processes by students, teachers and parents. The document called *Education for democratic citizenship 2001 – 2004*, issued by the Council of Europe, provides guidelines concerning teaching and learning conducted by schools and outside the school system in democracy, about democracy and for democracy (Huddelston, E., Garabagiu, A., 2005). Not only post-socialist countries but also those which have longer enjoyed democratic traditions, including Poland, were encouraged to build democratic structures with engagement of those involved in education.

The Hungarian Institute of Social Studies TARKI carried out a survey among citizens of post-socialist countries, in which they asked a question: Which is the better system of government: democracy or socialism? Only Czech citizens (52%) supported democracy. The percentage of respondents who appeared to be advocates of democracy was the following: Estonians – 37%, Slovaks and Romanians – 30%, Poles – 29%, Hungarians – 28%, Ukrainians – 26%, Belarusians and Slovenians – 22%, Bulgarians – 21%, and Russians – 13%. The most alarming is the fact that many respondents do not care how power is exercised in their countries. Such an attitude of indifference was observed in citizens of the following countries: Belarus – 52%, Slovenia – 48%, Ukraine – 43%, Poland – 42%, Estonia – 37%, Hungary – 36%, Russia - 35%, Bulgaria – 30% and Romania and Slovakia – 21%. (*Nostalgia za komunizmem* 2009).

Discussion

General Remarks

27 years following the transformation, Poles do not positively evaluate democratic methods of exercising power. Utopian thinking mixed with a necessity to take political decisions, with lethargy and incompetence of many officials of the educational sector, with voluntarism and mythically interpreted belief in realization of great issues. Ethics was clearly separated from politics, which was becoming only a play of interests. Its subsequent acts were played by different protagonists who were trying to make the society (their audience) support changes which were just proposed or which were already being implemented. Many a time education has appeared to be a human and material structure, an ideal means for enhancement of authority for those who exercised it. Besides, it was also a challenge for politicians who had opportunities to abuse their authority. Politicians did not finish the constitutional reform which was supposed to turn the whole educational system into a democratic and social one. Subjects did not undergo any revolutionary changes, either, which means that students, teachers, parents and supporters of these places, e.g. scouting instructors, priests, guardians – sports coaches, etc. were deprived of social self-realization, both individual and collective. Negligence of the reforms proposed by the Solidarity movement in 1980 – 1991 resulted in:

- politicized system of education,
- inhibiting the process of decentralization of the educational system (statism),
- immunizing education against social control,
- limiting autonomy of teachers, parents and students,
- consolidation of educational and upbringing illusions (Śliwerski 2009, 2010, 2013).

Ideological Context of Education

Educational macro policy is closely connected with ideological wars which have been waged by political parties since 1991. For this purpose parties use the educational system, which serves as a means of indoctrination and realization of ideological programmes. Employees of the Ministry of Education, who are replaced by some other officials after subsequent parliamentary elections, which results in a change of the ruling party, try not only to attract advocates of the ruling political party but also manipulate subjects of the educational system in the name of political correctness. It is just political correctness that is the reason why education spheres are involved in various conflicts, concerning curriculum (e.g. a required reading list, change in teaching and upbringing issues), outlook on life (secular upbringing and implementing religious elements into the upbringing process, sexual vs. pro-family education), and the structure of the system (state vs. public financing, closing down and opening schools, modifications in types of schools). As a consequence of those never-ending conflicts and top-down implementation or withdrawal of certain reforms or changes, Polish education is either weakened by the ruling party or by parties which are running for office, or politics and ruling parties are defeated by education.

A dual system of supervising education by local administration (management body controlled by the party elected in elections of local administration) and by central administration (pedagogical supervision held by chief education officers who are appointed by the minister of education) is the greatest disaster for regional educational policy if the local government consists of politicians who do not belong to the ruling party but the opposing one (coalition). Frequently this opposition might result from personal conflicts whose reasons are unknown to the public. The conflicts however, do not allow to realize certain goals or at least, make this realization difficult. There is no clear division of tasks and competencies in the two different administrations. They cannot initiate cooperation and even inhibit realization of assigned tasks.

Since 1989 there have been 19 different ministers of education. In their policy they postponed political processes, rejected them at all or pretended to be implementing some

changes. On the 20th anniversary of the Polish transformation a sociologist, P. Śpiewak (2013), related to this observation and said: “we slightly resemble savages living in ruins of socialism. Although the era of the People’s Republic of Poland symbolically finished 20 years ago, we still live in a post-statist society where conditions which are close to natural, are masked by great and ambitious statist structures and these inhibit rather than accelerate some phenomena in education, health care and public administration”(Śpiewak 2013).

A very balanced battle is still being fought and its opponents demonstrate completely conflicting interests or preferences and try to get rid of each other. Each decision and change were in the opinion of the subsequent ruling fraction unprepared, or due to little time only partly prepared, or finally, implemented too late or too slowly. Factual arguments were not important. What really mattered were political and party preferences or commitments of subsequent officers managing the educational system. Skarga (2008) called the characteristic method of exercising authority (...)“a revolution of the jealous”. No matter you wielded power or belonged to the opposing party. Whoever dealt with implementing changes in the educational system, tried to “delete” projects of changes or real achievements made by predecessors (considered enemies or hostile opponents) from their memory. By despising the achievements, ignoring or destroying prior positive changes, the new administrators felt satisfied”(Skarga 2008, p.24).

In macro policy of the educational system, many of those responsible for this sector demonstrate vindictiveness and jealousy. These qualities of character drive them to destroy their enemies. No matter you wielded power or belonged to the opposing party. Whoever dealt with implementing changes in the educational system, tried to “delete” projects of changes or real achievements made by predecessors (considered enemies or hostile opponents) from their memory. By despising the achievements, ignoring or destroying prior positive changes, the new administrators felt satisfied. Germans call such attitude *Schadenfreude* (E. von Braunmühl 1978). A consequence of inventing new project and ideas and rejecting some others which were considered unneeded was a waste of public money and efforts. However, nobody was made responsible for the waste. The school as an institution is neither supposed to involve in a dialogue with its students nor follow the principle of subjectivity, solidarity, democracy, tolerance, justice or liberty. However, it is a common belief that relationships between officials exercising power in the educational system and school principals, relationships between school principals and teachers and, finally relationships between teachers and students and the students’ parents must be based on formal authority (powers, institution) that occupies a higher position in hierarchy and the authority is identified with certain obedience or conformity, which is however against the idea of democracy. It is more probable that an authoritarian society will create more favourable conditions for producing authoritarian personalities which will be submissive to the state authority.

School

Lack of genuine autonomy in the school and the educational system, as Radziewicz (1988) wrote at the end of the 1980s in his dissident work, makes them remain farther from human life and turn them into institutional environments rather than educational. “That is why, students emigrate internally; they resort to alcohol, drugs but first of all, they play truant, escape from school as if it were a prison (...). Why do they behave like that? Because they do not feel like home. They think everything around is hostile or at least unwilling or indifferent towards them. It is an institution. They escape to people, no matter what kind of people they are” (Radziewicz 1988, p. 5). At those times the educational system and teachers were immunized against social control. Consequently, the ruling authorities possessed almost

unrestricted powers, which allowed them to act against teachers, students and their parents, who were deprived of any possibilities to appeal to the public and expect any help from it. Despite constitutional changes which occurred in our country this problem was not solved. School self-governments only apparently influence the process of socialization and have the right to co-manage schools. Students are sometimes assigned tasks, but those are usually connected with organizing self-service in school canteens, participating in decorating the school building for various school galas or national holidays or organizing free time at schools (e.g. discotheques, balls, festivities, sports competitions etc.).

Contemporary Polish school is characterized with apparent solidarity. Actually, factors which unite it are fear and constraint rather than common consciousness, authenticity, good will, professionalism or unity of human hearts. Teachers and school principals cannot agree for democratic ideas to permeate school environment because in their opinion, schools are not supposed to propagate such ideas. As a consequence, those who are ruled are not those who rule. Students are still not invited to any discussions regarding their matters. Also, students' parents who are their best advocates and defenders of their interests, are ignored in such discussions. They are not allowed to do much, except for providing financial help in order to save schools from complete economic decline and infrastructural misery. Teachers are not interested in making their own profession autonomous but they are naive by believing that trade unions will solve the problem for them (Nowakowska-Siuta, Śliwerski, 2015).

Teachers

Provisions of an act on education, under which tasks assigned for the school board are carried out by the teachers board in schools or other educational centres in which such a school board was not established, appeared to be another factor inhibiting the process of transforming public education into social education. No head teacher needs another body which will co-decide and give opinions, if by law, he or she is granted the right to autocratically exercise power. Hardly any teachers, students or students' parents know the educational law well enough to try to demand rights or execute claims against those exercising authority in schools. School principals did not inform parents or students on their rights. Teachers, on the other hand, did not want to be initiators of bottom-up changes, which would make them devote more time to non-teaching activities in schools (when their extremely low salaries are an affront to their dignity).

A teachers board is not a democratic body because since totalitarian times its head has been the school principal, so the employer. A student self-government, like a parent board, have no factual (legal) possibilities of executing resolutions, provisions or other claims against a school principal and teachers, which is obvious if parents want to contribute to changes or modifications regarding management methods. Any forms of autonomy are created centrally. Even if they allowed to be created in a bottom-up way, (e.g. a parent board, self-government, school board), their tasks and range of activities are determined by central authorities. Consequently, due to controversies and limited powers, any resistance against centrally implemented projects or educational policy of the state, demonstrated by particular education subjects is considered an attack on the state.

Since 1991 two opposing approaches towards education have been observed. In practice, the education segment is either administered by advocates of authoritarianism, who want the segment to be state-managed and instrumentally administered. According to the opposing approach the education segment should be open to democratic ideas, social and characterized with subjectivity. Unfortunately, as a consequence of consolidation of the first approach, the process of building autonomy and converting the education segment into a social one was somehow "cemented" and blocked. Kwieciński (1990) warned against such a

phenomenon as early as in 1990 by saying that “democracy does not create itself. A destruction of the totalitarian system in Poland does not automatically open doors to democracy. The school might become an unconscious or consciously created and manipulated tool used to inhibit development of the society and prevent its walk towards democracy”(Kwieciński 1990, p. 2).

Unfortunately a lot of chances were wasted: time, high motivation, involvement of many people who cared about education – teachers and scientists, material and financial resources. But first and foremost, any creativity was thwarted and the authority severely undermined. And this destructive process is still going on. Teachers got used to the fact that any time a different party takes office, they have to leave behind what they have been recently involved in. It will be more reasonable to dissociate themselves from their prior activities and apologize for hasty support of the last government. Such a policy results in finding new, loyal advocates of the authority, replacing employees in educational supervision with new personnel and maintaining a close relationship between the membership of the ruling party and apolitical service in the Polish educational system. Due to it, local communities had an opportunity to confront real authority and achievements of chief education officers, made in the field of education, with their political connections, which did not affect results of the contest in any way.

Education Currently

The Polish education in 2016 is thus only partly public and educational policy of the state is anti-democratic. Schools are financed from local taxes but the central government deals with education and teaching processes as well as manages the education sector. Over the 27 years of transformation the Polish education has not experienced a reform strategy, which Kwieciński (2014) called (...)“a planned and positive change in cooperation”, a cooperation of everyone with everyone (science with practice, administration with science, practice with authorities and administration and authorities with all of them) which would be far from political divisions and aimed at building democratic and humanistic education”(Kwieciński 2014, p. 22). Components of the educational system, teachers, pedagogical supervision, parents and their children (students), the Church, trade union members and politicians are still unrelated to each other. The educational system lacked political unity which might be perceived as a social approval of solving educational problems in an amicable way, or as Michael Fullan says, an approval of carrying out positive policy which focuses not on rejecting reforms or their top-down implementation but on a few important priorities which should be properly implemented and having other additional priorities at hand so that they can be immediately implemented if there was such a need (Potulicka, 2000, p. 155).

The school of the transformation period converts from a school, being an institution of a non-democratic state into a school which is striving clumsily and ineffectively to liberate itself from new forms of political and ideological domination, and turn towards humanism, dialogue and democracy. The school committed itself to shaping social and moral life of young people, a duty which had been previously carried out by a family. However, it did not manage to work out an ideological compromise with all subjects responsible for education because advocates of one ideology were always dissatisfied with it. Even an introduction of a school voucher did not provide education in schools offering a consistent system in terms of religion and morality or in schools which would be solely secular and free from any transcendence since a state school cannot be, particularly in small towns and villages, so much axiologically and ideologically different.

Macro policy of educational authorities maintains statist and fundamentalism-oriented way of teaching and upbringing. Of at least five strategies of education reformation which

make up the theory of social change, only one dominates. It is a top-down model, which has been dominant since the 19th century. It is identified with an authoritarian method of managing educational institutions and due to this model educational institutions are perceived as very formal and with a fixed organizational character. It is characterized with a vertical hierarchy of the whole system and its subsystems and its territorial range can be different. Maintaining the vertical system of education management might make the whole education dysfunctional in critical situations, leads to bureaucracy, organizational confusion, conflicts over competencies, cooperation problems with a self-government, and what is highly important, social control of the mismanagement is to great extent limited. Such is the idea of statism which is identified with depriving a human being of not only possessions but also his ego. The process of making schools state schools, which is against provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the Act on Education, is used by subsequent ruling authorities to change the nature of man and convert teachers, students and their parents into “a state-owned property”.

Conclusion

What reforms should be implemented in the Polish educational system? Education must become a common and national priority, not affected by any political divisions. Thus, the following changes should be introduced into educational macro policy.

- self-limiting state authority by basing education management on three principles which are related to each other: decentralization, autonomy and subsidiarity;
- delegating competences and granting financial resources to local governments;
- creating school administrative personnel who will be stable and resistant to political changes, well-qualified and competent so efficient, contributing to a long-term development strategy of education and an improvement of education quality, so effective and finally, providing students with high quality educational offers, so friendly to citizens – parents and children.
- eliminating the class-lesson system of teaching.

It is necessary to finish the democratic revolution in Poland in the field of education as well as revolution of subjects. Such a step will completely eliminate the principle of centralism and will enable to create grounds for further decentralization and development of autonomous structures. It is also highly important to introduce mechanisms of non-antagonistic competition in educational services so that potential innovations or pedagogical experiments can be commonly applied and are not treated as reasons for exclusion of other competing parties from the fight for approval and extra privileges. We live in a post-political society, in which differences and conflicts will always exist. However, it does not mean that its rulers have the right to inhibit expression of these conflicts and differences. Any authority will always do its best to exclude its opponents or at least lessen their strength if it is not prevented by structural and legal instruments.

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