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Polish Education After the EU Accession

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present changes undergone by the Polish education system after the accession to the European Union. In the article the changes are collated together with the main and distinctive trends which had existed in Europe before the accession and the ones that were introduced subsequently. The article shows that the tendency to unify the member states' education systems is non-existent in the European Union. It also points out that the importance attached to education by the EU member states has not been as considerable as the importance given to economy. The paper is divided into two main parts. The main objective of the first part is to describe the decision-making process in the member states (as far as the common education policy is concerned) and its result, which was the report stating that education was considered to be a peculiar area of social politics and as such required separate arrangements and decisions. Therefore, there are neither specific procedures nor integration requirements for the associated and associating countries. However, as far as Poland is concerned, during the accession process the country was obliged to meet the expected standards, in particular the standards in the reform of the education structure and curriculum. The second part of the paper comprises the analysis of Polish activity in the following fields:

- lowering the age of the compulsory education commencement,
- reforming the structure of the education system and curriculum,
- practising teaching profession.

The article further elaborates at length on the significant factor in the process of democratization of education, which is parents' involvement in the functioning of a school.

Unified educational system has not been created in the European Union. The EU activity in the field is limited solely to organising mechanisms allowing for cooperation and experience sharing. The EU does not interfere with the educational systems existent in its member states. Each member state decides on its own how to educate its citizens. Therefore, it can be said that the tendency to unify the member states' educational sys-

tems is non-existent in the European Union. Also, the importance attached to education by the EU member states has not been as considerable as the importance given to economy. The educational policy is a subject of provisions of Articles 126, 127 and 308 of the Maastricht Treaty. Building on this, the following are considered to be the purposes of the EU educational policy:

- dissemination of the sense of European integra-

tion among teenagers;

- teaching languages spoken in the EU member states;
- support for students' and teachers' foreign exchange;
- solving problems concerning acknowledgment of diplomas and studies.

The purposes have been realized by support for cooperation in education; however, the decision as to what and how should be taught has been entrusted to the EU member states. That is why, each member state has created and introduced a different educational system enriched with, so called, European education.

Thus, it is worth noticing that the Polish accession to the EU in 2004 did not impose any modifications to Polish educational system; however, the reforms introduced in Poland have enhanced the quality of education.

In the Polish literature on pedagogy the subject of the EU education was in the limelight in 60s and 70s of the 20th century. The discussion of the subject matter was generated on the occasion of conducting comparative analysis of the member states' educational systems, and presenting and analysing education reports on internal structure, educational assumptions and curriculum in the chosen countries of Eastern Europe.

Contemporary portrayal of the state of education in the EU is diversified and its understanding requires the process of decision-making on the common educational system in the governments of the member states to be recalled. Although pursuant to Articles 118 and 128 of the Rome Treaty of 1957 a common policy in vocational education should have been introduced in the EU, the provisions constituted merely wishful suggestions since education was not identified as a priority by the associating countries. It had apparently lower priority than agriculture, finance or customs policy.

Not until November 1971 the meeting of the ministers for education at the time was held and, as a result, the resolution on cooperation in the field of education was signed. The document did not introduce substantial changes as far as legal aspects of education in the EU were concerned. However, it directed attention to the fact that education should be considered a peculiar area of social politics and as such required separate arrangements and decisions. Then, the position was confirmed in 1974 by the Education Committee by the European Council. The committee issued a statement in which it recommended that each and every member state provided its own educational structure with great care. Simultaneously, the committee agreed that

the methodology or curriculum should not be subject to unification due to the need to respect educational traditions of the member states.

The hereinabove position on the subject was reviewed in 1979 by the European Parliament. At the time all the member states expressed their willingness to adopt reforms in the following areas: internal market, technological cooperation, monetary cooperation, environment protection and cooperation in foreign policy as well as safety. However, in case of educational union Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Great Britain registered their reservations.

The situation repeated itself in 1986 on the occasion of the Single European Act having been signed. The act constituted the second (the first was the Rome Treaty) official document regulating the hereinabove areas. Again, the subject of education was ignored by the member states.

It was not until the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (on 7th February 1992) that the subsidiarity principle (the principle implying that the part of the member states' sovereignty should be transferred to the international organisations) for education was accepted (Dziewulak 1997). Thus the EU institutional frames have been created by five main EU institutions (three of which have influenced directly the shape of the educational policy in the EU):

- Council of the European Union (former Council of Ministers);
- European Commission;
- European Parliament;
- Court of Justice of European Union,
- Court of Auditors.

The European Commission is the executive body of the European Union (its quasi-government) comprised of twenty-three directorates-general (known as DGs), two of which, DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG EAC, for Education and Culture, are responsible for policy on education in a broad sense. The work of the two directorates supports the issues of development strategies, comparative analysis, cooperation and exchange between European educational institutions, vocational education, up-to-date teaching methods, educational programmes (notably ERASMUS, COMMET, EURYDICE) and cooperation in other strategic directions of the EU socioeconomic policy.

In 80s and 90s of the 20th century as well as the first decade of the 21st century, the European Parliament has adopted numerous acts on education. The acts should be considered the expression of the EU Commission's

and Parliament's strong interest in and their approval for common educational policy. However, at the same time the acts can be regarded as merely cautious and necessary contributions to socioeconomic cooperation within the EU. Despite the failure to provide specific treaty regulations on European integration, the integration in the field of social affairs, culture, mobility, free transfer of information policies has been brought about. Nonetheless, the EU has no competence to impose or indicate direction for the development of education in the member states. Lack of consistency between actions and legal regulations attracts attention to the fact that there is no common educational concept envisaging, for an instance, solutions similar to economic or monetary union. Therefore, it is justified to state that the situation of the educational system in the EU is quite complex since it is deeply ingrained in the realities of the country where it functions, and at the same time it should meet the international requirements (Suwiński, 2004).

During the negotiation conducted by the Polish government concerning the accession to the European Communities the regulation on education was elaborated on. The regulation envisaged educational cooperation aimed at enhancing the general level of education and professional skills in Poland with regard to the Polish priorities (European Integration Bureau, p. 25). Pursuant to the provision, the educational cooperation should encompass the following areas:

- education reforms,
- training at the work place and continuous training;
- courses preparing for the demands of the labour market;
- management training;
- teaching languages spoken in the EU member states;
- translations;
- equipment delivery to the training centres;
- promotion of the European studies.

The document did not contain any recommendation nor advise on the associative elements of a unified European school or educational community. However, the act comprised general statements that the cooperation should support teachers', students' and superintendents' exchange, foreign traineeships and internships, and should help in preparation of the curriculum.

It could be argued that lack of detailed educational procedures or integration requirements for the associated or associating countries is an indication of the fact that a very limited significance is attached to education in the EU. Nevertheless, the more probable explanation

of the phenomenon is failure to formulate an essential concept of unified European school. Hence it could be assumed that if there was such a concept, the member states would be prone to expect the requirements of the unified educational market to be met the same way they do in terms of political and economic matters. Since the requirements of the unified educational market seem to be ignored, it could be justified to state that the educational policy is decentralized and, therefore, decisions concerning educational systems are entirely entrusted to the member states.

During Polish accession to the EU, the country was obliged to meet the expected standards concerning different areas, in particular the standards in education, including the reform of the education structure and curriculum.

As far as the changes introduced to the educational system are concerned, modifications of compulsory education are of the utmost significance, due to its universal character and the fact that it affects all young people. The issue of obligatory education is integrally and closely related to the structure of compulsory educational system. The latter comprises the following elements: the age when the compulsory education commences or terminates, division into educational levels or stages, common core curriculum, or diversified character of compulsory education, certificates awarded at the end of each stage of education, types of educational institutions and methods of choosing particular educational institution. It has always been the role of compulsory education to equip each and every citizen with basic knowledge and skills required in the process of their social and professional integration.

Within the last three decades numerous EU member states have introduced reforms of the structure of compulsory education. In most EU member states compulsory education is treated as being synonymous to compulsory school attendance. But in Denmark, Austria, Finland and, to a lesser extent, Belgium, the understanding of the term "compulsory education" is different since in these countries if parents provide their children with education, attendance at school is not obligatory.

The tendency to prolong education period is still in force, thus it could be concluded that children's stay at school for the longest period possible is regarded as a good solution. There are many reasons behind the tendency. Primarily, the society believes in the value of education as a key to individual and collective promotion. As a result, young people enter the labour market with delay.

The length of compulsory education in the EU ranges from 8 years (in Italy) to 11 and even more¹. In general, compulsory education starts at the age of 6 but in some countries it commences even earlier – at the age of 5 (the Netherlands), or even at the age of 4 (in Luxembourg and Ireland). Although the oldest age of commencement of compulsory education can be encountered in Scandinavian countries, in Finland and Sweden the official age at which education starts is 7 years old, but in fact children start education at the age of 6. Also, the structure of compulsory education varies significantly between different countries (the differences are in division of the stages or cycles of education). Poland had the oldest age of the compulsory education commencement. At each stage of education Polish students were older than students of the same level in other EU member states. The decision to lower the age of commencement of compulsory education constitutes a significant instrument of evening educational opportunities. The earlier a child acquires non-chaotic knowledge determined by its skills and interests, the greater the certainty that its education is going to proceed accurately.

Building on this, in March 2009 the Polish Sejm made the decision to introduce an amendment of the Act on the Educational System lowering the age of compulsory education commencement from 7 to 6 as from 1 September 2012. Therefore, since 1 September 2011 each and every five-year-old has been obliged to undergo pre-school education. However, until then the decision whether a child started its education earlier was made by the child's parents freely. In accordance with their decision since 1 September 2011 only 23.6% of the children qualified to become students of the first grade (on condition that they participated in a pre-school education for at least a year) commenced their education. However, the reform (in lowering the age of the commencement of compulsory education) was a subject of numerous protests. The protesters (parents) voiced their great concerns about the state of preparations for reception of the six-year-olds, which were scarce or none. Therefore, it was decided that schools would be given another one-year period to complete the preparations, and the reform was postponed till 1 September 2013. During the discussion about the reform it was agreed that, in general, the lowering of the age of the compulsory education commencement was justified and beneficial for children. Nevertheless, it

should take place in good conditions (Eurydice 2009). The discussion resulted in the new government's and parliament's decision to allot additional funding of 600 million zlotys at the preparations. The sum was mostly spent on furnishing schools and equipping them with proper didactic base and on organization of extracurricular activities that would satisfy children's needs. Realization of the project was supposed to result in each student of grades 1–3 having access to attractive and extended offer of extracurricular activities tailored to its needs and educational or developmental capabilities. The preparations supported realization of the purposes of a new curriculum since its main focus was on individualization of teaching process so that the process would be adjusted to needs and capabilities of each and every student [MEN 2010]. Due to the new tide of parental protest, the new government and parliament decided to hold on to the age of 7 as the age of the compulsory education commencement. Nonetheless, the decision that a child should start schooling earlier was left to the child's parents.

One of the most incisive examples of European dimension of the Polish educational system was the core curriculum reform introduced in Poland. As soon as the regulation introducing the educational system reform was published, the Ministry of Education issued a decree on the conditions and procedure of authorization of the school basic-level curriculum and on the conditions and procedure of authorization of the school manuals to be used at schools.

In the decree, the definition of the term “curriculum” created in accordance with the European tendencies was presented. The decree specifies that the curriculum should comprise at least one educational stage and should determine the following elements: the detailed educational purposes – as far as instruction and upbringing are concerned, the teaching material related to the educational purposes, the procedures of achieving the purposes, the description of the assumed students' achievements and proposals on the methods of their assessment. Pursuant to the regulation, teachers who teach at a particular educational level are obliged to establish the curriculum set which should be called “the school curriculum set” and take into consideration the whole core curriculum for the particular educational cycle. The decree was followed by numerous research papers and coverages that help teachers to find their way in the new educational reality (Komorowska 2007).

Yet another priority of the educational policy in the EU is to create a new teaching role model. Transformation of the educational system has considerably

¹ The more detailed information on the educational systems in Europe might be found in EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>) – a database directed by Eurydice.

influenced teachers. In particular, the extension of compulsory education was affected. The consequence of democratisation of education and the trend to formulate a new core curriculum is that students with different capabilities and attitudes towards education are students of the same class and the role of the teacher is to address needs of each and every student. The individualized approach implies that teachers should get to know their students very well so that they could define their specific needs and fulfil them. Also, the revision of teaching methods has been brought about by the advent of new telecommunication and information technologies. In addition to that, the contemporary concept of education – understood not only as teaching *per se* but also as education of a person as a whole – means that the list of duties related to teaching and upbringing is getting longer and requires more flexible approach from teachers themselves, and it forces teachers to pay more attention to psychological and emotional development of their students [Eurydice 2009].

All the above changes affect multiple areas related to the teaching profession: shift in its function and requirements for access to the profession, education and vocational training or working conditions.

The analysis of the reforms of the teachers' vocational training for the purpose of compulsory education introduced in different countries unveils a number of common features for each member states that can be summarized in the following manner:

- teachers' training for the purpose of every stage of education takes place in higher education institutions,
- length of studies is minimum three years,
- teaching traineeship constitutes a significant component of education and the element was introduced into teachers' training program by each and every country.

In conclusion teachers' training consists of three core elements: reliable academic knowledge of the field of expertise, conversancy of the pedagogy and teaching traineeship.

Recent years have experienced major focus on promotion of teachers' vocational training in most of the countries. The apparent effect of the focus is creation of new institutions and organisations specializing in coordination of vocational training. Despite numerous incentives it is still difficult to convince teachers to participate in any form of the training. In some countries the problem was solved by payment or even promotion incentives – by making promotion conditional on vocational training (Eurydice 2009).

Recent years have also experienced a strong trend towards improvement of teachers' working conditions. Belgium has given teachers more freedom in conducting their didactic duties by allowing for being discharged of didactic duties if a teacher participates in vocational training. In Spain teachers are allowed for promotion if they undergo exams. Similarly, in France teachers have been offered new promotion possibilities, salary increase and one-year payable leave so that they could prepare for internal promotion or participate in vocational training. Portugal has created a new career path for teachers and determined explicitly the professional promotion requirements (Eurydice 2007).

As far as the analysed areas are concerned, Poland does not differ significantly from other EU countries. In Poland teachers' training consists of one element only, which is higher education. A very important element of the education is teaching methodology; however, reliable academic knowledge of the field of expertise is given priority. It has to be outlined that the Polish concept of the teachers' vocational training is based on three fundamentals:

- institutional upgrading of the professional skills in the higher education institutions (postgraduate studies),
- methodological counselling and
- intramural upgrading.

The system is interrelated with the challenge to keep the talented and devoted teachers working in the profession. Improvement of socioeconomic status of teachers resulted from two complementary trends. On one hand, it has been agreed that teachers should be appreciated more. On the other, more duties are entrusted to teachers. It could be, by extension, argued that Poland, like other EU countries, encourages teachers' education and vocational education. Moreover, Poland actively supports social and professional promotion of teachers. The apparent effect of the focus on education is creation of new institutions and organisations specializing in coordination of the vocational training. Also, intramural upgrading is of the utmost importance.

One of the most important factors of democratisation of European education is parents' participation in the school life. Need for synergy is of utmost importance where there is a huge discrepancy between public education and family. Since there is no need to go into details of the history of parental participation in educational systems in the EU member states, it should be noticed that in most countries parents or their representatives had not been a part of formal educational structure until 70s of the 20th century (in some

countries, such as Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, France, Austria or Norway, the process of parental inclusion started even earlier). Even though 1980s saw a dynamic growth in legislative activity in most countries, parental participation in schooling did not evolve in the same manner in every country. There was a huge time gap between first regulations and the following legal acts.

In most EU member states, the 1990s reforms of legislation and education created a new legal frames for parental participation in educational systems. The subjects of school autonomy and parental participation became a centre of discussion (Eurydice 2008).

In all countries parents are free to choose a type of school for their children, irrespective of whether the school is public or private. In most countries, however, choice of a particular public school is limited by the domicile requirement, in particular in big cities students are ascribed to a region that determines the school they can attend (regionalisation). Also, the choice of a public school might be limited by other elimination or selection criteria that apply when the school cannot offer a place to all applicants. Other limitations appear (in particular in case of high schools) in the countries where enrolment to a particular school depends on the assessment of student's knowledge or skills. The latter limitation is frequently encountered in Poland.

Generally speaking, parents' representatives might engage themselves at least in the choice of a general character of education, e.g. curriculum, teaching methods, schedule or pilotage educational programmes. Parental participation is particularly significant at the school level. Even if an advisory board exists at the national, regional or local levels, parents are sometimes misrepresented. Parents' representation models vary among countries and forms of the representation are related to broader political context of the particular society. In general, it can be said that at each level (central – regional – local) parents are in minority in advisory boards. Even participation in the boards is rare. However, parents constitute majority of advisory boards in two countries, namely in Denmark and Scotland. The advisory boards functioning at schools are usually equipped with competence to make decisions. The decision-making competence concerns two aspects:

- internal decisions concerning current functioning of a school, including organization of extra-curricular activities, and
- general decisions concerning essential aspects of educational system, including, school budget and its allocation.

In every school parents have, at least, partial influence on the headmaster election. In Polish schools or educational institutions one may encounter school (or educational institutions) boards. A board typically participates in managing internal affairs of the institution, which includes the following actions:

- enactment of a school statute,
- submission of suggestions concerning yearly financial plan and opinion on it;
- requests from the superintendent or other supervisory body for examination and assessment of functioning of a school, headmaster or teachers;
- opining the plan of a school work, innovation projects and experimental projects;
- assessment of school situation and status on its own initiative and submission of requests to headmaster or proper authorities in the hereinabove matters.

A school board might gather funds from voluntary contributions or other sources for the purpose of supporting statutory activities of the school.

A school board consists of representatives of three group and each group is represented equally. The groups are:

- teachers elected by all the teachers working in the school,
- parents elected by all the parents,
- students elected by all the students.

In the schools, where there is no school board, the duties of a school board are exercised by pedagogical or parental board. Parental representation, however, can be given a different name.

Parents of the children who study in Polish schools might also have their representation in other social educational institutions such as National Education Board by Ministry of National Education or Voivode Education Board by the Voivode².

In addition to that, parents have the right to participate in the works of commissions electing candidates for the post of headmaster or assessing professional output of the teacher asking for professional promotion. Also, parents have access to evaluation rules through students' evaluation system. On top of that, every school has an obligation to inform parents about their children's expected end-of-term grades.

The analysis of hereinabove educational areas indicates that Poland does not differ significantly from the

² Parental participation in social educational institutions is regulated by Articles 45–54 of the Polish Act on Educational System.

“old” EU member states in most of the areas (however, some instances of incorrectness can be observed here as well). In at least some of the areas Poland can be regarded as a leader for the “new” EU member states. In Poland, teachers’ vocational training and education are strongly supported. Also, the raise of the teachers’ social and professional status is promoted here. Headmasters are supervised by particular, competent local authorities. Parental inclusion in the decision-making process at different educational levels is becoming more and more apparent. Polish procedures concerning certificates and confirmation of qualifications have converged with the EU procedures. So far, the most significant challenge for Polish educational system has been the shift in the orientation so that the system would become more skill-oriented. Last but not least, the problem of lowering the age of the commencement of education still requires final solution.

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