

Primary and Secondary Education in Canada and Poland- Compared: International Implications

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ABSTRACT

This article compares Polish and Canadian primary and secondary education in terms of systems, curriculum, governance and teacher education. It is motivated by the recent changes in Polish schooling. The theoretical framework for the work is supplied by the general notion of the school as an organization and social institution. Citizenship education and the integration of technology in teaching and learning are of concern to educators in Poland and Canada.

Introduction

Unlike Poland, Canada does not have a national system of education. Each province and territory has its own system of schooling. One advantage of having separate school plans in a country as large as Canada is that regional needs are more likely to be dealt with. Conversely, a single system of schooling might strengthen Canadian identity.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to compare Polish and Canadian primary and secondary education in terms of systems, curriculum, governance and teacher education.

Polish and Canadian educators are sensitive to the linguistic needs of minority groups. Generally speaking, the language of instruction in Polish schools is Polish, but there are provisions for Slovaks, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Byelorussians and Lithuanians to be taught all subjects in their own language (Janowski, 1992, p. 49). Likewise, "minority language education" (English or French) is provided for in Canada (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada).

Both Poles and Canadians are committed to the notion of compulsory education and public (state) schooling. Poles start school at age 7 and can leave at age 18; Canadians are expected to begin their studies generally between 5 and 7 years of age depending on the province or territory and remain in school until they are 16 or older (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada). As a matter of fact, there are guarantees in both countries for private schools and special education.

Perhaps, the main feature of Polish and Canadian education respectively is: 1) the studying of West European languages at an early age¹ which are of benefit to Poles in the European Union and 2) religious tolerance (Johnson 1968, p. 5). In some Canadian provinces, there are separate school systems based upon religious preference, Ontario and Quebec, for example.

It is the recent reforms in Polish primary and secondary education that motivate this study. The theoretical framework for this work is supplied by the general notion of the school as an organization and social institution.

The Systems and Curriculum

In September 1999 the Polish Ministry of National Education and Sport introduced significant changes into the primary and the secondary school system ((Kucińska, 23 February, 2000; Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 1999, pp. 3-72; Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 1999, pp. 3-80; Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 1999, pp. 3-48). The number of years of primary schooling was reduced from 8 to 6 years, 3 year junior secondary schools (gymnasiums) were created, and starting in September 2001 students (depending on their academic ability) began their studies in either 3 year academic senior secondary schools (specialized lyceums) with the possibility of earning a school leaving certificate (the matura) or 2 year vocational senior secondary institutions (Bogaj et al., 1999, p. 70).

The Ministry hopes that junior secondary schooling will lead to an increase in the number of pupils entering secondary school due to the fact that these institutions will be better staffed and equipped than many primary schools (Kucińska, 23 February, 2000, Ministry of National Education, 2000, pp. 12-13). Poland's rural dwellers will most likely significantly profit from this particular change. A UNESCO report entitled "Republic of Poland Education For All: The year 2000 assessment" indicates that 35% of the urban

adult population have finished secondary school whereas somewhat less than 15% in rural centers have done so. The establishment of junior secondary schools is in itself a benefit because it segregates pupils between the ages of 13 to 15 from much younger ones.² That is, of course, if these schools are located apart from primary institutions.

Academic schools include broad vocational training in their curriculum, and the vocational schools offer “wide fields of study” instead of “narrow ones” which prepare students to move from “one vocation to another” (Bogaj et al., 1999, p. 86; Kupisiewicz, 1999, pp. 105-108). This approach to vocational education is very much in keeping with the labor requirements of a global market economy which Poland now is now part of. Moreover, it is possible for those students who originally choose to study at vocational institutions to prolong their education in two grade academic schools and then write the school leaving exam (Bogaj et al., 1999, p. 71; Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 4).

The new system involves: 1) integrated skills teaching for the first three years, 2) block instruction for the next three and 3) teaching by subject throughout junior secondary school. In the old system, instruction by subject began in the second grade. Since it is thought that children have difficulty differentiating between subjects at an early age these changes in teaching practices are an attempt “to make the school fit the child” (Kucińska, 23, February, 2000).

Besides, these new initiatives include standardizing the written part of the school leaving exam (the matura) resulting in increased equivalency of school leaving certificates (Szymański, 2000, 197)³.

Major changes also took place in the Ontario secondary school system of education. Grade 13 was abolished at the end of the 2003-2004 school year. Therefore, Ontario learners are now able to pursue post-secondary learning opportunities after 12 years of schooling as is the case with their Polish counterparts.

Furthermore, according to a 1998 report published by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, interesting initiatives were happening a few years ago in education in other parts of Canada:

1. The “development and implementation of curriculum that reflected the Dene and Inuit perspectives” (Northwest Territories).
2. The development of “common curriculum and assessment instruments at the K-12 level” (Newfoundland and Labrador).

The first initiative suggests that the government of the Northwest Territories is sensitive to the needs of its aboriginal citizens.

Governance and Operation of the Systems of Education

There is wide participation pertaining to educational administration in Poland and Canada. In Poland, pedagogical supervision is carried out by the Ministry of National Education and Sport. The responsible minister is represented at the voivodeship level by a superintendent (kurator) and at the institution level by a school head-teacher or director (Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 31). On the other hand, the administration of school affairs is handled by district authorities (senior secondary schools) that are smaller government units than voivodeships and communes (kindergartens, primary and junior secondary institutions) that are even smaller still (Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 29). All educational expenditures are covered by the state budget (<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/international/databanks/dossier/mainfram.htm>). Communes may have difficulty carrying out their responsibilities due to a lack of expertise even though the EU has

provided assistance for the training of local administrators of education through their Term Plan (OECD, 1996, p. 98; Bogaj, et al., 1999, p. 107). During the Communist Period such responsibilities were undertaken by the Ministry of National Education and Sport.

Each Canadian province has a department of education that looks after K-12 schooling (Withworth, 1995, p. 404). Individual schools headed by principals are under the influence of school boards whose areas are provincially determined. Boards are responsible for the commercial side of education such as: 1) the hiring of teachers and 2) the purchasing of equipment (Withworth, 1995, p. 404).

Supplying Personnel for the Systems of Education

K-12 teacher education normally occurs only in Canadian universities (Berg, 1995, p. 624) when in fact in Poland various sorts of higher schools like universities, academies and higher pedagogical institutions participate in such training which provides opportunities for different kinds of learning experiences (Bogaj et al., 1999, p. 209).

The status of teachers who are employed in the Polish public school system is defined in the Teachers' Charter which has recently been amended (18 February, 2000) by parliament (Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 34). At the moment, there are four "categories of teaching posts": trainee teacher, contracted teacher, appointed teacher and chartered teacher. Also, provisions are made in the charter concerning advancement, wages and working conditions. The Charter does not cover terms of employment -communes and district authorities are responsible for such matters (Kuchinska, 11 October, 2001). On the other hand, provincial and territorial governments are responsible for teacher certification in Canada which restricts the movement of teachers from one part of the country to another. However, there are agreements concerning the "transfer of teacher credentials" from one jurisdiction to another (<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/international/databanks/dossiers/mainfram.htm>).

Polish teachers are limited in their capacity to become involved in the educational process because teacher – training in Poland focuses on preparing them to teach only one subject (OECD, 1996, p. 94). This approach is particularly not suitable for aspiring primary school teachers because recent changes in primary school teaching methods (which were mentioned earlier) do not include subject teaching.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, civic education is a requirement in Polish and Ontario schools which means that governments in both Poland and Canada are attempting to foster democratic ideals and values in their citizens (<http://www.civnet.org/journa/issue2/jfmzbug.html>; <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/secondary/oss/oss.html#diploma>).

The integration of technology in teaching and learning is a challenge confronting educators in Canada and Poland.

NOTES

1. Starting in the late 1940's, the Russian language was adopted as the primary foreign language to be instructed to all students from the age of 11 and upwards, regardless of the kind of institution (Janowski, 1992, p. 43). A "West European language" was

offered as a “second foreign language” only to pupils attending full secondary school in other words, institutions leading to a school leaving certificate (Janowski, 1992, p. 43). From the 1989-90 academic year onward the learning of Russian ceased to be compulsory, and, at about the same time, the Polish government began to encourage the widespread teaching of West European languages in schools (Janowski, 1992, p. 50). Fifty-five new teacher training colleges have been opened throughout Poland in support of the government's policy (Janowski, 1992, p. 51). From 1991 to 1992 two foreign organizations endorsed this new training initiative by sending volunteers to Poland: 1) Solidarity Eastern Europe, a Canadian company and 2) the American Peace Corps. The author has first-hand knowledge about the activities of these organizations. In 1991 he was recruited by Solidarity Eastern Europe to teach English at The Technical University of Rzeszów, and while he was there he got to know one Peace Corps worker.

2. This point was made by Mgr Jadwiga Tyszownicza who is a senior lecturer in English at the University of Science and Technology in Cracow.
3. The Polish school leaving certificate is a recognized qualification for admission to undergraduate programs at the University of Toronto, a leading Canadian university with an international reputation, suggesting that both Polish and Canadian secondary schooling are of similar standard (University of Toronto).

INTERVIEWS

Kucińska, Teresa, (MA), Deputy Director of the Department of Post-Primary Training and Permanent Education, Ministry of National Education in the Republic of Poland. Interviewed: 23 February, 2000 and 11 October 2001 in Cracow.

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