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## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN POLAND**

### **Abstract**

Poland's complex history strongly influenced the development of educational system. Together with the Catholic church, formal and informal education helped to preserve national identity and prepare society for future independence during the partition period. In the communist era, education was the chief mode of restructuring the society and improving the social mobility of the hitherto unprivileged workers. The postcommunist era brought an extensive debate over the goals of restructuring the socio-political system.

The goal of this paper is to share with the readers some ideas about the past and the present of the Polish educational system in order to point out that the reform of it is still a continuous process aiming to find out the optimal way for individuals' holistic development. The authors, who are mental health care providers, put also to the spotlight some examples of mental health education in Poland.

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Poland is a country located in Central Europe. With about 38 million inhabitants this is the sixth largest population in the European Union [Eurostat, 2011]. The origins of the country date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the kingdom of Poland was founded. The crowning achievement of the development of the state and its territorial expansion was establishment of Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569. In the mid-17th century the decline of the monarchy began and in 1795 Polish lands were annexed by the Kingdom of Prussia, Russian Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire. The independence was regained in 1918 and lost again in 1939 due to invasion of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. After the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War Poland remained a Soviet satellite state until the collapse of the communist system in 1989 when the process of transition towards parliamentary democracy started. The country complex history strongly influenced the development of educational system. It can be easily observed that turning points in Poland's history, such as partition of the country or beginning of Soviet's supremacy, had major effects on the priorities and organization of education. Thus, the development of national education system can be divided into several periods.

### **From the establishment of the Kingdom till the educational reform in the 18th century**

First single schools run by the Roman Catholic Church and educating the clergy emerged in the 11th century. It was in the 13th century that importance of education started to increase. Poles were studying at the universities abroad and in the country education on lower levels was still developing. The curriculum was divided into two parts: *trivium*, comprising grammar, logic and rhetoric, and *quadrivium* including arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. The network of provincial schools was created but they were generally restricted to nobles, knights and merchants. The development of education was crowned in 1364 with the establishment of

Jagiellonian University, the first university in Poland and the second in Central Europe. It soon became the main centre of education for intellectual elite and a place of academic tolerance. At the beginning the profile of the university indicated that one of its aims was to educate the qualified clerks. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the number of provincial schools nearly tripled. Although they were still run by the clergy, the curriculum also included knowledge indispensable for civil life. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century textbooks emerged and developed as instruments of teaching. The coverage of the textbooks content was focused mainly on practical skills, such as accounting. Unfortunately, Counter Reformation partially inhibited development of education in Poland. The nobility gained monopoly in public and political life which resulted in decrease in education importance [Samsonowicz, 1990]. However, a number of Polish scholars were aware of the poor condition of education and initiated progressive tendencies to modernize the curriculum and to expand educational opportunities over non-privileged classes. The reform started with the establishment of National Education Commission (KEN) in 1773, financed with the funds confiscated from the abolished Jesuit Order. KEN's main achievements include creation of educational structure, unification and rationalization of the national curriculum in accordance with Enlightenment thought. In schools Latin was replaced by Polish language and equal right for education for girls and boys was introduced [Davies, 1996].

### **Partition period (1795 – 1918)**

Through the eighteenth century, Poland was a refuge for academic figures persecuted elsewhere in Europe for unorthodox ideas. The dissident schools founded by these refugees became centers of avant-garde thought, especially in the natural sciences.

Unfortunately at the end of the eighteenth century partition challenged the work of the Commission on National Education because Germany, Austria, and Russia sought to destroy Polish national consciousness by germanizing and russifying the education system. Educational opportunities for Polish children differed depending on the area of partition. In general, the Austrian sector had the least developed education system, whereas the least disruption in educational progress occurred in the Prussian sector. Prussian authorities were also more tolerant of Polish culture manifestation. The important underground initiative undertaken by the Poles in order to protect their culture was Flying University established in Warsaw. Lectures were organized in different places to avoid deconspiration. One of the notable graduates of the University was Maria Curie-Skłodowska [Davies, 1996]. In Austrian partition heterogeneity of the population impeded introduction of one language to the schools and allowed to save some autonomy.

In a consequence of the partitions Polish population was dispersed among three nations for over 100 years. During that time education played an extremely crucial role in maintaining national identity and culture of the Poles. This aim was achieved not only through formal education but more importantly, through self-education. It is estimated that as much as 30% of Polish people in the Russian partition was gaining knowledge and skills independently of the educational system [Davies, 1996].

### **The interwar period (1918 – 1939)**

Obviously the main concern of the education authorities in this period was the task of reconstructing a national education system from the three separate systems imposed during partition. The first attempt to achieve this goal was the Teachers' Parliament which gathered in 1919. It recommended a number of reforms, e.g. seven year universal primary school and linking of the primary schools with the secondary education. In the end the Ministry rejected majority of the recommendations but the Parliament's vision of universal educational opportunities for all classes had important symbolic meaning for future educational system development. In 1932 the school reform introduced seven year universal primary school which was supposed to increase chances of obtaining secondary education. However, in rural areas majority of children ended their education at 4<sup>th</sup> class, often due to the lack of possibilities to achieve even mandatory level of education. Thus, inequalities in educational opportunities experienced by different social classes continued [Krasuski, 1985].

Although national secondary education was established in the 1920s, the economic crisis of the 1930s drastically decreased school attendance.

Among the educational accomplishments of the interwar period were establishment of state universities in Warsaw, Wilno (Vilnius), and Poznan (available only to the upper classes), numerous specialized secondary schools, and the Polish Academy of Learning.

### **The World War II (1939 – 1945)**

Between 1939 and 1944, the German occupation sought to annihilate the national Polish culture once again. All the secondary and higher schools were closed to Poles and elementary school curricula were stripped of all national content. In response, an extensive underground teaching movement developed under the leadership of the Polish Teachers' Association and the Committee for Public Education. As early as in 1939, the Secret Teaching Organization (TON) was established in order to arrange the underground teaching, which included all levels of education, up to the university level [Bukowska, on line]. The teaching movement was crucial for the maintenance of the Polish culture and national identity, as well as for the preparation of the base to rebuild the educational system after the end of the war.

### **Post war period (1945 – 1989)**

In 1945, the number of Poles unable to read and write had been estimated at 3 million. In the early 50s, all levels of Polish education were plagued by shortages of buildings and teachers. The Polish educational system during the era of Soviet supremacy had four distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, education was strongly ideologized and politicized. The school was perceived as a main tool of creation of the new human being – *homo sovieticus*.

Secondly, the aim of the educational system was to create and maintain the desired social structure with the specified proportions of different social classes. In harmony with the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the working class was supposed to be the base of the structure. A wider availability of education was to democratize

the higher professional and technical positions previously dominated by gentry or upper middle class. Because industrialization goals also required additional workers with at least minimum skills, the vocational school system was substantially expanded.

Thirdly, the educational system was strongly centralized. The curriculum, as well as the content of the textbooks, were unified across the country.

Finally, due to the authority negative attitude toward private ownerships and the resentment toward religious schools, the private sector was barely present in the educational system. Additionally, the authorities were determined to control the ideological transmission in educational process [Dolata, 2005]. The education reform was an important demand of the widespread Polish demonstrations against Stalinism in 1956. Under the new socialist first secretary, Władysław Gomułka, the government education policy rejected the dogmatic programs of Stalinism and in their place began the first period of the postwar education reform. Religion as an education subject was restored, at the option of parents. In the vocational program, agricultural training schools were added, and technical courses were restructured to afford greater contact with actual industrial operations.

### **The modern era (1989 – today)**

After the emergence of the Solidarity movement in 80s, the student and teacher organizations demanded a complete restructuring of the centralized system and autonomy for local educational jurisdictions and institutions. The political transformation, which followed the collapse of the communist system, was accompanied by the changes in the educational system. The major processes included creation of the pluralistic market of the curriculum and textbooks, which was not influenced by the communist ideology. Moreover, the educational system was decentralized and as a result schools gained more autonomy and became more involved with the local environment. Another major process, regarding the secondary education structure, consisted in decrease in number of pupils obtaining only vocational education and increase in number of graduates with secondary and higher education. Modernization of the educational system was achieved with the change in educational structure (introduction of the *gymnasium*) and the curriculum reform [Dolata, 2005]. Currently, Poland is participating in international educational assessment programs, such as PIRLS programme [Konarzewski, 2007] or PISA survey [OECD PISA, 2009].

New trends are also being observed in lifelong learning options. Rapid development of technology and changing working patterns, forced the adult population to constantly raise their educational achievement [Błędowski, 2010]. In 2010, 5,3% of adult population of Poland participated in education or training, compared to 4,3% in 2001 [Eurostat, 2010].

As one of the EU Member States, Poland participates in the implementation of the Community Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) established on the basis of Decision Nr 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and Council dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 2006. The structure of LLP comprises the following sector programmes: Comenius – school education, Erasmus – higher education, Grundtvig – adult education, Leonardo da Vinci – vocational education and training and Study Visits.

Another worth mentioning initiative regarding the field of education is the University of the Third Age, whose aims are the education and stimulation of retired members of the community – those in the “third age” of life. Some study groups do not have a prepared syllabus, but draw on reports of current affairs in their topic subject to prompt conversation and research. Some groups are designed to cross disciplinary boundaries: combining society, technology and science. Some groups aim to bridge the generation gap in the field of information technology, opening up an exciting new world to many who might have been oblivious of it otherwise. There are also many less educational activities including bridge tuition, countryside walks, dance in all its forms etc.

A new initiative, dated in year 2010, is the University of the Second Age for persons 45+, whose aims are to fill the gap between the First and the Third Age education in the lifelong learning system and combat the social exclusion of marginalized groups.

### **Mental health professionals’ training**

The authors, who are mental health care providers, put also to the spotlight some examples of mental health education in Poland. Mental health has become the subject of university education across many fields: medicine, nursing, social work, psychology, sociology, pedagogy and law. In this paper we present some examples of training in psychiatry, psychiatric nursing and social work.

#### *Psychiatry*

Psychiatry was introduced as a separate subject at medical faculties in the middle of 19th century. In 1951, all Polish university medical faculties were transformed into independent organizations – Academies of Medicine. In the late 2000s, the former name was changed into Medical University. Medical schools have status of State Higher Education Institutions and are financed by the state.

The undergraduate course in clinical psychiatry provided during the last year of curriculum is focused on knowledge of mental disorders – etiology, pathogenesis, psychopathology, classification, treatment, rehabilitation and social psychiatry; skills in psychiatric examination and mental status assessment; skills in providing a holistic approach to the treatment of mentally ill persons [Bilikiewicz & Bomba, 2002].

The postgraduate training in clinical psychiatry lasts five years. The candidates apply for residency in training centers nominated by the Minister of Health upon the recommendation of Accreditation Committees. The training programme is focused on knowledge and experience needed to independently solve clinical problems, developing mental health promotion, gaining skills for working in multidisciplinary team within different organizations. Resident has his/her individual tutor and individual supervisors when practicing in different mental health services [Bilikiewicz & Bomba, 2002]. Training is concluded by passing National Examination which has few phases.

#### *Nurse education*

In the 1980s and 1990s, the nurse education was provided in medically based high schools in five year programme or in post-high professional medical schools

over two years. The education was focused mainly on instrumental tasks. In December 1995, the Polish government signed the European Agreement on Nurse Education and Training. The first transformation extended the educational curriculum to two and a half years with the subject related to health promotion, prevention, health education and diagnosis. The second modernization extended the educational curriculum to three years with at least 4600 hours of training. The college-level nursing studies include a set of general, basic and professional subjects concluded by a practical exam and graduate thesis [Lipińska & Osicka, 2002]. Masters degree requires subsequent two years studies with at least 1300 hours of training and ECTS points not less than 120.

Specialist two and a half year neuro-psychiatric nursing programme is focused on general rules and detailed description of work, psychiatric nursing in a hospital as well as in the community settings with acute and long-term disorders, specific topics related to treatment, psychological and social factors affecting mental health, neurological nursing, ethics and legal issues.

#### *Social work*

Since last decades, the world dynamic industrial development improved people's quality of life, but also created negative phenomena like alienation, marginalization, social exclusion and equality. The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education (ASE), established in 1922 in Warsaw, is the first higher education institution in Poland to have started a full-time social work study program (previously, social work faculty was incorporated into other social science courses). The programme is designed to meet the needs of the disadvantaged people who need professional care and support. Its base constitutes of theories about the causes, challenges and cycles of clients' difficult circumstances, theories and methods relating to social work practice enriched by specialist knowledge of social policies and general knowledge of psychology, sociology and pedagogy as well as involvement in field work.

Students of social work develop their practical skills in managing non-governmental organizations and gain the knowledge of raising funds from external sources, including EU funds.

#### **Conclusion**

The authors present a brief overview of the history of education in Poland in order to point out that the reform of it is still a continuous process aiming to find out the optimal way for individuals' holistic development. As a mental health care providers give a few examples of mental health professionals' training to show that in this field the reform is also ongoing process.

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