



INSTYTUT SPRAW PUBLICZNYCH

I N S T I T U T E O F P U B L I C A F F A I R S

ul. Flory 9
00-586 Warszawa
www.isp.org.pl

tel. (48 22) 845 68 58
fax (48 22) 845 68 62
e-mail: isp@isp.org.pl

Roman Dolata, Krzysztof Konarzewski, Elżbieta Putkiewicz

Recommendations for educational policy after three years of school reform

- The Ministry of Education and Sport should adopt a policy of equal educational opportunities for students from different social backgrounds. For that purpose, it is necessary to constantly research the geographical and family correlates of school achievement and to oppose the practice of segregation based on address, the family's socioeconomic status, or previous achievement
- We suggest creating, similarly to other European countries, a national centre of pedagogic supervision, which would coordinate the work of school inspectors.
- To institutionalize the national core curricula, a committee of experts and practitioners should be established, reporting directly to the Minister. The committee should also set examination requirements, which are an integral part of the core curriculum.
- In order to improve the quality of curricula and coursebooks we suggest the procedure of approving them for school use should be changed.

In the last few years, discussions and research around the reform of the public system of education (primary and middle schools) focused on three main issues: the influence of the schools system on social differences, the quality of syllabuses and coursebooks, and the professional status of teachers. Summing up that debate, we see three main goals for educational policy in Poland.

Preventing the growth of social inequality

The research results and analyses available so far do not indicate that the reformed primary and lower secondary schools may be intensifying social differences. Nor is such a conclusion suggested by the results of the first nationwide test of students' achievements in the history of Polish education. The dynamics of regional differences can not be judged, as there are no earlier results to compare with this year's. The results in different *powiats* (counties) did not vary much. Differences between students of rural and urban schools were negligible - smaller than the difference between boys and girls. The results of the language and humanities test in rural middle schools were slightly worse than in urban ones, but the results of the maths and science test were practically the same.

Differences between families are even less well explored. The analyses of test results done so far used aggregated data from each county, producing unreliable correlation indices??. Research commissioned by the Institute for Public Affairs in the years 2000-2001 indicates that grades achieved by children in middle (lower secondary) school are less strongly related to parents' social status than in primary school. The opinion that creating middle schools will facilitate the realization of educational plans for their children is more common among the families of blue-collar workers than those of white-collar workers. In middle-class families the prevailing view is that lower secondary school will make no difference to such plans. It is therefore mainly working-class families who have hopes for the social advancement of their children thanks to middle schools.

On the other hand, research suggests that there is a risk that the school system may contribute to deepening social inequality in the coming years. Schools are becoming part of their local communities. Maps of nationwide test results indicate that social cohesion is among the most important factors explaining differences between counties. Presumably, close-knit communities are better able to cope with the problems brought about by system transformation - for example, by investing in their children's education at family and local community level. This intended result of the reform means, however, that education contributes to reproducing local living conditions and may contribute to perpetuating regional inequalities.

Differences between schools are also becoming more marked. Many of them try to stand out above the average, as can be seen from the growing interest in ratings and quality recommendations. Middle schools see the enrolment of selected students from outside their area as a method of achieving high academic ratings. Some put those students in separate classes, which offer better learning conditions (if only due to their composition). Many

middle schools segregate students into classes based on their achievements so far, which means social differences are mirrored in the school structure. One class consists of students from the central village of the *gmina* (community), another - from small and remote villages; one comprises the children of families with a high social status, another - the offspring of the poor. The lower secondary schools' attempts at gaining prestige - also one of the intended effects of the reform - means those schools are responsible for re-creating home conditions and reinforcing social inequality.

In response to those problems, education authorities should, first of all, regularly analyse geographic and family correlates of achievement test results and of choices of education after lower secondary school. This task could be entrusted to the Central Examination Board: during the annual exams the Board should gather data about individual students and schools using a representative method.

Secondly, an effort should be made to improve conditions in the worst schools. Thanks to the national tests, this year we are able to identify them for the first time. Seeing the results will certainly inspire some head teachers to improve conditions; however, it would be a mistake to count on changes being made everywhere. The Ministry should devise a strategy for improving conditions in the worst schools, and set aside funds for it. Local educational authorities should be responsible for implementing that strategy.

Thirdly, it is imperative that the Ministry should initiate a policy of persuading schools to limit segregation. Lower secondary schools in particular should:

- Adopt transparent rules and procedures for the enrolment of students from outside their area; this should include announcing information about the number of places available and the rules for enrolment early on, and after completing the procedure publicizing the criteria according to which candidates were accepted (such as the minimum number of points). School should not receive donations from candidates' parents.
- Design detailed criteria for dividing students into classes.
- Avoid grouping students from outside the area in separate classes.
- Strive to divide students so as to achieve equal learning potential in all classes within the same school. The head of one of the middle schools studied by us divides all new students into three groups based on their primary school certificate, then puts an proportional number of students from each group in each class. This is an example worth imitating. In rural schools, or schools whose students come from diverse areas, division based on place of residence should be avoided.

- Avoid grouping students based on participation in optional fee-paying lessons (e.g. creating a class of students who attend additional foreign language lessons.)
- Avoid creating classes with a view to individualized teaching (e.g. a class of mathematically gifted students, or students at an advanced level in a foreign language). For that purpose it is more appropriate to divide students into groups at different levels within a class or across classes in the whole year.
- Avoid segregation masked as remedial or therapeutic classes. Such division is admissible only if it offers students better conditions than in other classes (e.g., smaller number of students in a group, better prepared teachers, additional pedagogic and psychological assistance).

It is certainly not possible to achieve those aims using administrative methods. A better approach is to try and make school staff, parents and school inspectors aware of the dangers of such segregation (many headteachers believe it to be a rational innovation). With regard to school inspectors, it is difficult to rely on them at present, as the decentralization of this function has gone decidedly too far. Inspectors assess the quality of the schools' work using a whole array of questionnaires and schemes which ignore the question of educational justice. It is difficult change the situation, as every local educational authority is supposed to be, according to the principles of the reform, an independent research institute, a centre of educational policy, and a unit of the civil service. One organization can not effectively perform such diverse functions, and 16 such independent organizations can not ensure uniform supervision in the whole country. It is necessary to create a central supervisory body, similar to those existing in other European countries.

Creating mechanisms for improving curricula and coursebooks

Curricula and textbooks are subject to market mechanisms. This guarantees diversity, but not necessarily quality. The market is fairly effective in eliminating poor quality consumer goods, but not so in the case of curricula and coursebooks. An average teacher does not have easy access to everything that is published, and even if they did, they are not always able to make a rational choice. The products are numerous, and each one is very complex, which makes it difficult to assess its value quickly. If a chosen and adopted coursebook reveals its shortcomings, it is not always easy to replace it: changing a coursebook involves costs and a disruption in the teaching process, with no guarantee that the new one will be better.

What children and young people learn from is often decided by marketing, local fashion and chance. There is no mechanism in place to ensure that poorer products will be pushed out by better ones. In particular, eternal exams can not be counted on to achieve this, as they measure general skills, which can be acquired using various curricula and coursebooks. What remains is supervision by the Ministry. The Ministry has created signposts for authors in the form of core curricula, and the approval of specific products for school use is based on the opinions of specialists chosen and paid by publishers. This does not ensure improvement.

The institutionalization of the core curriculum may be helpful. This important, yet consistently marginalized document will be able to play the expected role in education only if it is the subject of ongoing, unrestrained discussion among experts. For this purpose a curriculum committee should be established, reporting to the Minister of Education, and consisting of scholars and practitioners. Because teaching content should not be decided separately from examination requirements, and exam standards should form an integral part of the core curriculum, the committee should take over the responsibilities of the currently existing council reporting to the director of the Central Examination Board.

The quality of syllabuses and coursebooks requires more attention. The Ministry should adopt the principle that evaluation refers to the syllabus, coursebook and supplementary materials (teacher's book, workbooks) as a whole. It is worth reviewing the list of products already approved with that principle in mind. The approval procedure needs changing: a new set of books (at least for a three-year cycle) should first be reviewed by experts independent of the publisher - selected and hired by the Ministry. If the reviews were positive, the minister would approve the books for a trial period of several years. To obtain permanent approval, results of research into didactic effectiveness would have to be submitted (opinions from teachers and students, achievement measurements). The relevant directive should contain the requirement for products to be researched by organizations independent of the publisher, and the development of such organizations should be fostered within the structures of higher education in cooperation with experimental schools.

Teacher training reform

The position of the teaching profession in Poland is unclear. Teachers do not form a corps of civil servants, as they do in France, nor are they a professional group subject to the laws of the job market, like in Sweden. In a state school, a teacher's employee is the local government, but his or her salary and terms of employment are set out in a national law. The ministry

controls neither teacher training nor recruitment, and the employer is not free to conduct a rational staffing policy. The stages of “professional development” prescribed by the amended Teacher’s Chart force teachers to compile detailed documentation of their achievements (especially various training courses) and to submit to complicated procedures. Whether all the effort will pay off in the future is not clear, as no one is studying it.

A complete solution to the problem of teachers does not seem probable in the near future. Still, small steps are possible. One of them refers to training future teachers. The current practice is that a university or college graduate whose grade book contains evidence of having done 270 hours of unspecified “pedagogic subjects” and a further 150 hours of equally unspecified teaching practice can be employed as a teacher. What those hours contain depends on the faculty, and in practice - on individual lecturers, often inexperienced ones, who run the classes. Nobody knows what the value of that education is nowadays. Among the hundreds of faculties there are certainly some which prepare students well for the teaching profession, but they do not constitute a majority. Employers’ complaints and the popularity of in-service training courses featuring basic skills bear testimony to that.

Educational authorities have been passively watching this poor practice for years. Instead of accepting any collection of marks in a grade book as proof of teaching preparation, the Ministry should commission institutions of higher education to prepare and run teacher training courses ending in a recognized exam and providing a separate certificate of teaching qualifications. Such a solution would make it possible to uniform and modernize the training of future teachers and restore cooperation between schools and higher education, which had been weakened by the reform.

The authors are experts of the Institute of Public Affairs. In the years 2000-2002 they ran the research project “Monitoring educational reform.” Dr Roman Dolata and Professor Elżbieta Putkiewicz work at the Department of Pedagogy, Warsaw University; Professor Krzysztof Konarzewski works at the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.