

Ministry of National Education

*Report on the
Development of Education
in Poland*

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Introduction

In accordance with the guidelines of the International Bureau of Education, the report prepared for the 46th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE), the first one to be held in the new millennium, should assess changes implemented in the education system during the last decade, and describe reforms and innovations currently introduced in school education.

The last decade was a period of far-reaching reforms in the Polish education system. The first part of this report presents interrelations between educational policy and economic, social and political transformations. Successes and failures of partial reforms of school education undertaken in the years 1990-97 provided the background for a fundamental reform of the education system which was designed and implemented in 1998.

The second part of the report describes the Polish school education system as existing today.

The main sources of information used to prepare the first part of this study were for obvious reasons the reports on the development of education presented by the Polish Ministry of National Education at subsequent sessions of the International Conference on Education.

Part one

Changes in school education in the years 1990 - 2000

The year 1989 was a crucial year in the contemporary history of Poland. In order to illustrate the background and scale of transformations which took place at that time, this study opens with a brief presentation of the report prepared for the 41st session of the ICE in 1988¹.

1988

The introduction to the above-mentioned report reads as follows:

„For the programme of far-reaching reforms to be implemented in the People's Republic of Poland, the institutions of the education system should be made the main forces working to meet contemporary challenges. This approach was

¹ Ministry of National Education, Development of Education within 1986 -1988, *Report for the International Office in Geneva for 41st Session of the International Education Conference*. Warsaw, 1988.

manifested in a resolution of the 24th Plenum of the Central Committee and the 10th Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party. Tasks for the whole education system were formulated in these documents“.

This short quotation shows how great are the changes that have taken place during the last twelve years in our country. Let us begin with the most conspicuous issue: the name of the State. This change symbolises fundamental or even revolutionary systemic transformations which have been made in Poland.

Our quotation refers to the documents of the communist party setting „tasks for the whole education system“. It was not the society, educational communities or the ministry of education that determined the provision and development of education. The ministry was only „the managing body“. Strategic decisions were taken by the leadership of the communist party (the above-mentioned Polish United Workers' Party). It was by no accident that the excerpt quoted above found its place at the very beginning of the Report for the 41st Session of the ICE. This was a way to emphasise that education of the young generation and the lines of development for the country were determined by the party. No such ideological references can be found further on in the report.

The school education system existing in Poland in 1988 was characterised by extremely far-going centralisation. Strategies and policy for the development of education were designed by the authorities of the communist party. All other, even detailed, issues were however decided by the Minister of National Education. The powers of the latter covered issues concerning:

- curricula,
- textbooks and other teaching aids admitted for use in school,
- rules for the functioning of all types of schools,
- rules for recruitment of pupils to schools,
- organisation of the school network,
- classification of occupations and specialisations in which education in vocational schools was provided,
- rules for awarding titles and diplomas attesting to vocational qualifications,
- rules for organising and setting examinations.

The Minister of National Education was also authorised to supervise schools coming under the authority of other sector ministries. Entrusted with similar powers, *kurators* (heads of educational authorities at regional, i.e. province, level, called *kuratoria*) were authorised to carry out inspections in all types of schools and educational establishments regardless of the sector ministry the latter were subordinate to. It should be clarified here that individual sector ministries were responsible for running schools which trained specialists (mostly at the skilled worker's level) for a given branch of the economy.

Acting as the head of the educational authorities at the province level, the *kurator* supervised all schools in his/her area, including those subordinate to other sector ministries. The key responsibility of the *kurator* was to ensure the application of the Act on the School Education System and the Minister of National Education's implementing regulations as covering all aspects of the school activities. The *kurator* was responsible for the so-called staff policy, taking decisions on employment and dismissal of teachers in schools under his/her authority, as well as for in-service teacher training.

The *kurator* was required to undertake regularly periodic inspections in schools. Inspections were intended to improve the quality and effectiveness of the school's performance. However, due to the lack of measurement tools, clear procedures and standards, inspections were in practice mostly of purely formal nature. In fact, they primarily served to reinforce the feeling that schools and teachers were under constant control.

School education in a *gmina* (the lowest local government level or, in other words, an administrative unit at the lowest level) was managed by the school inspector. The inspector was responsible for financial matters in school education, submitted proposals concerning the organisation of the school network, including those for opening and closing down educational establishments.

Considering the extensive powers of educational authorities, one can see it clearly that the scope of powers of a school head teacher and teachers' council was very limited. School autonomy was in practice non-existent.

With the criticism of the overloaded curriculum mounting up, the authorities allowed schools to introduce slight modifications in the curriculum then in force. The report describes this step as an extension of school autonomy.

The basic legal act governing the provision of school education in Poland was the Act on the Development of the School Education System (15 July 1961).

Another equally important document that provided the legal framework for the school education system was the Teachers' Charter adopted by the lower house of the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) in February 1982 (during the martial law). The adoption of the Charter meant the fulfilment of far-going demands formulated by the „Solidarity“ trade union in 1981.

„The work on the drafting of the Charter of the Teacher's Rights and Duties and a new school education law, undertaken by teachers' trade unions, was accompanied by numerous controversies and discussions which led to the mediation by the Sejm Committee (June 1981) and the unexpected drafting of a new law; the new law, adopted by the Sejm in February 1982, guaranteed most of the privileges demanded by teachers (18-hour working week, employment guarantee, early retirement)“².

The low teaching load guaranteed by the Charter had a significant effect on the costs of education. Over 80% of the state expenditure on education were allocated to teachers' salaries. Moreover, guaranteed employment (regardless of performance and quality of work) provided equal protection to both innovative and excellent teachers and their hardly effective, conservative colleagues.

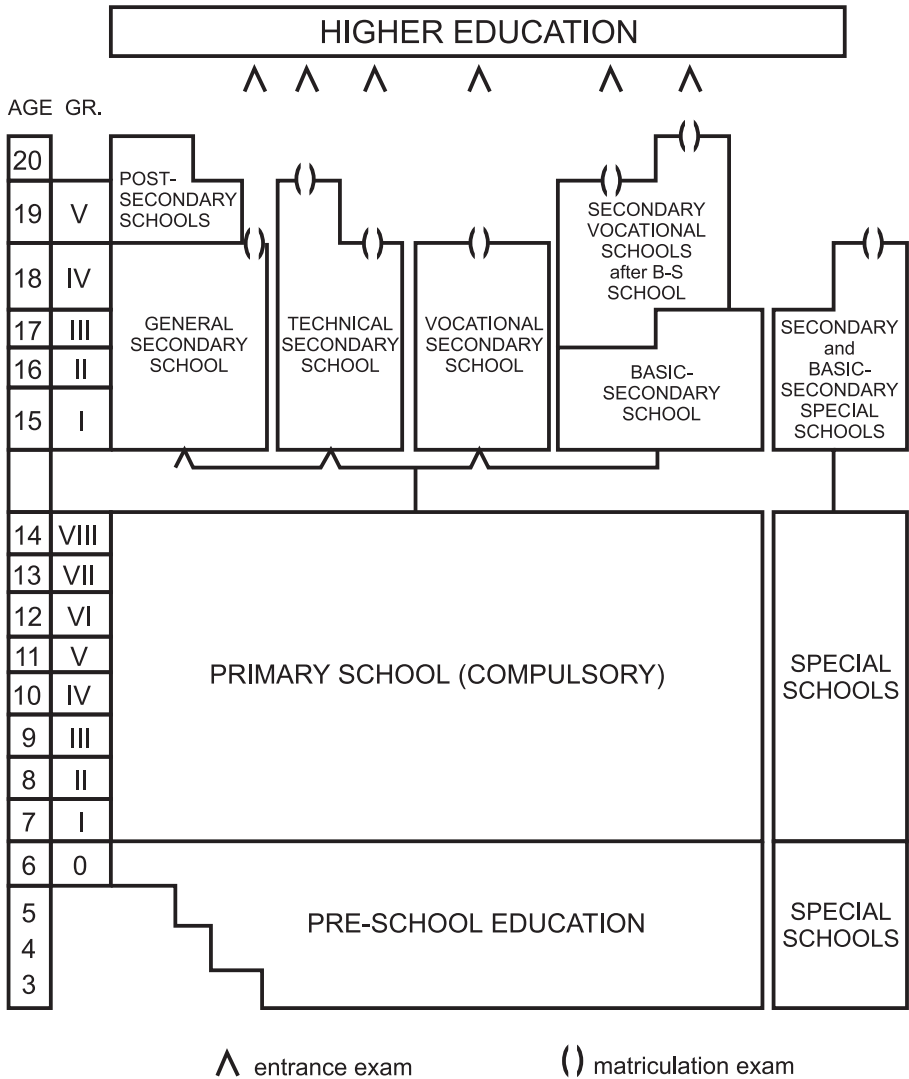
Structure

The school system comprised the following types of establishments:

Nursery schools (children aged 3-6). Children in the nursery school (kindergartens) received professional care provided by their tutor-teachers, medical care and meals. Costs of meals were only partly financed by parents, and parents with low income could also be exempted from contributing to these costs.

² Zbigniew Kwieciński, „Common Education, the Crisis and the Transformation of the Monocentric Political Order“ in „Changes in Poland, the Implications for Education“, Institute for Educational Research, Warsaw, 1991.

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN POLAND („OLD“)



As required by the legislation, the working hours in nursery schools were suited to parents' professional duties and their working time. In practice, it meant that nursery schools in towns were open daily for 7 to 11 hours, and those in villages for 5 to 8 hours. The working hours of village nursery schools were extended in summer when parents were engaged in seasonal activities³.

Eight-year **primary schools** (children aged 7 - 14) was described as the key element in the education system⁴. The primary school was a compulsory school providing free education. Its task was to ensure all-round development of the pupil and prepare him/her to continue his/her education in a secondary school or in a basic vocational school training for employment. 97% of primary school leavers took up education in basic vocational schools or secondary schools.

General lyceums (age 15 -18) provided pupils with a possibility of completing general secondary education in four years. Having passed the final examination (maturity examination, *matura*), graduates were entitled to apply for admission to higher education. General lyceums offered courses in the following specialised sections: mathematics and physics, biology and chemistry, humanities, classics, and sports.

Three-year **basic vocational schools** (in principle for students aged 15 -17) trained skilled workers. Graduates were awarded a certificate attesting to qualifications in a given occupation. The certificate also served as the basis to apply for admission to supplementary technical schools where students could complete secondary education and take the maturity examination.

Basic vocational schools were of two types:

- schools for non-working young people which organised practical placements in school-based workshops,
- works-based schools for young workers which organised practical placements in an enterprise where the school was based.

Technical secondary schools (duration of 4 or 5 years; students aged 15 -18, 19) awarded to their graduates the vocational title of technician attested by a secondary school leaving certificate. Upon completion of education in such schools, students could also take the maturity examination which they needed to pass in order to be able to apply for admission to higher education.

Technical lyceums (15-18 years) trained skilled workers and offered the possibility of completing general secondary education and taking the maturity

³ Ministry of National Education, Development of Education within 1986 - 1988, Warsaw, 1988.

⁴ Ibidem.

examination. The establishment of such schools was justified by the authorities by the growing demand for skilled workers⁵. Post-secondary schools offered general lyceum graduates the possibility of acquiring vocational qualifications and the title of technician.

Examinations

The following three types of examinations were organised in the education system: entrance examinations to secondary schools (lyceums and technical secondary schools), the maturity examination (upon completion of a secondary school) and entrance examinations to higher education institutions.

The teaching contents covered in the final years of the primary or secondary school was in practice determined by the scope of entrance examinations to secondary schools and higher education institutions respectively. Since school curricula were overloaded and it was practically impossible to cover them thoroughly, teachers focused on those topics which might be included in entrance examinations, taking into account pupils' expectations.

An entrance examination to secondary schools comprised a written test in the Polish language and mathematics. Regional educational authorities (*kuratoria*) defined topics for examinations in each province. In addition, some schools organised tests in major subjects within individual specialised sections and tests for admission to classes where teaching was based on the so-called „authorship“ independently developed curriculum. Such examinations were often organised before the date of regular recruitment to secondary schools.

Many pupils took up this option as an opportunity to gain experience in taking examinations. One should bear in mind that pupils did not have any opportunity to take an exam during eight years of education in the primary school. Given the great interest in early examinations, schools which organised them could select the most gifted candidates. Consequently, it was easier for them to achieve good results in teaching, and graduates passed successfully examinations to higher education institutions. The school boosted its prestige and had more candidates applying for admission. In this way, elite lyceums were emerging which attracted great interest among the best primary school leavers. Moreover, entrance examinations to secondary schools had another role to play in selection. The authorities prepared places in basic vocational schools for ca 60% of primary school leavers. This was not in line with the aspirations of young people as most of them wished to complete secondary education. Applicants were not allowed to repeat entrance examinations. At the

⁵ Ibidem, p.30.

age of 15 (completion of primary education) as still covered by compulsory education, young people could not wait a year to take again an examination to the chosen lyceum. Having failed in the examination (or having obtained marks not good enough to be accepted to the chosen school), they were required to continue education in a post-primary school, this most often being a basic vocational school. Only rarely was this a school which offered training for an attractive occupation, e.g. in the service sector; such schools were very popular and selected pupils on the basis of a ranking of marks from the primary school at the beginning of the recruitment period. When the recruitment to lyceums was completed, places were no longer available in popular vocational schools. Underrating their abilities, many primary school leavers did not try to take examinations to a secondary school, fearing they might fail and be deprived of the possibility to choose a further education route. One can hardly say how many of them were entirely wrong in the assessment of their own abilities and thus lost a chance to receive a better education.

It is worth mentioning here another factor which affected primary school leavers' choices of further education routes. The completion of a vocational school (especially a works-based one) meant in practice a guarantee of employment to its graduates. Moreover, wages of skilled workers, particularly those in sectors such as hard coal mining or shipbuilding industry, were often higher than salaries of academic teachers. By contrast, general lyceum graduates, if not admitted to higher education institutions, had difficulties in finding an interesting, well-paid job. Thus, young people opted for education in vocational schools as a way to a financially attractive, peculiarly viewed career.

The maturity examination comprised two parts: a written part (the Polish language and a subject to be chosen by the student) and an oral one. Examinations were organised in schools and corrected by teachers working in them. Topics for written examinations were defined, for each province separately, by the *kuratorium*. Furthermore, topics set for individual specialised sections in general lyceums differed from those for technical secondary schools. These differences were not reflected in the maturity certificate. As a result, examination results were incomparable and could not serve to select those applying for admission to higher education. It was generally believed that examinations organised in schools encouraged dishonest or even fraudulent practices. This also undermined higher education institutions' confidence in results of the maturity examination. Thus, the maturity examination was only a necessary but insufficient requirement for admission to higher education. To become a student, applicants needed to obtain the best possible result in an entrance examination.

It should be pointed out that examinations could hardly be described as playing any diagnostic role, and provided only scant information about the effectiveness of the education system. The first relatively objective test of pupils' knowledge was the examination to a secondary school. However, this could provide information concerning only approximately half of the age group. Besides, given the differences between the provinces, examination results were hardly comparable. Another problem was that the results of the examination organised by secondary schools were not „linked“ to a given primary school. It was difficult to use those results to evaluate the primary schools' performance.

The same reservations applied to the maturity examination. In practice, the key criterion used by pupils and parents (customers) to assess secondary schools was the number (percentage) of graduates admitted to higher education. These data would not, however, say much about the implementation of curricula, educational programme, drop-out rate, etc. Thus, basic information necessary for the State to pursue an educational policy was not available.

Initial Teacher Training

Teachers were trained at four-year master-degree courses in various faculties of higher education institutions. This meant that a future teacher completed a higher education course where the curriculum was nearly identical for trainee-teachers and for students intending to take up an academic career. The only difference between teacher training courses and the so-called theoretical courses was that the curriculum of teacher training courses comprised elements of education science and psychology. Teacher training courses were most often chosen out of necessity (as the second best option) by those who did not obtain sufficiently good results in entrance examinations. As a result, following their graduation, many of them did not in fact take up a job in school despite the big demand for highly qualified teachers-schools would quite frequently employ persons holding only secondary education qualifications.

The effectiveness of the teacher training system was therefore extremely low. Future teachers were trained in a very expensive way at four-year university courses where the curriculum was only to a very limited extent suited to the specific needs related to work in school. And graduates were anyway looking for a job outside school.

Nursery school and beginning learning teachers were trained in post-secondary two-year teacher training institutes. This was a shorter and thus less expensive route to the teaching profession. Unfortunately, the quality of such courses left much to be desired.

Starting up their career, young teachers, regardless of the type of courses completed, were not prepared to handle the tasks that they were faced with. They possessed theoretical knowledge and were well familiar with their subject, but were often unable to cope with educational challenges and difficulties arising in a classroom. Moreover, their skills in the area of designing tests, building an assessment system and developing curricula left much to be desired.

* * *

During the times of real socialism, the view was reinforced that Polish school education was by no means inferior to school education in other countries. While general access to education was a point boasted about, no consideration was given to the fact that small village schools were very often unable to prepare their pupils adequately for further education. Nearly 50% of primary school leavers attended basic vocational schools which „channelled“ young people into narrow worker occupations.

All these shortcomings were revealed by dramatic changes which were to take place soon. The belief in the good quality of Polish education did, however, persist for a long time. In fact, that belief was hardly verifiable as Poland did not take part in international comparative surveys of pupil achievements carried out, for example, by the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA).

1990

The report for the 42nd Session of the International Conference on Education in 1990 was prepared in a new situation.

Agreements concluded as a result of the Round Table negotiations in 1989 gave rise to tremendous changes in Poland and throughout Central Europe. Elections to the lower house of the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) were held in June that year. These were not yet fully democratic or free elections, with two thirds of deputies being nominated by the communist party still in power. Nevertheless, one third of deputies was elected in accordance with the principles of democracy. After the elections, among those sitting on the *Sejm* benches were representatives of the democratic opposition, hitherto working underground and now taking all seats available within the electoral law adopted. The first elections to the upper house of the Parliament (*Senat*) were held simultaneously. These entirely free elections brought an overwhelming victory to representatives of the Citizens' Committee.

In September 1989, a new government was appointed with Tadeusz Mazowiecki as the first non-communist prime minister for more than 40 years.

The Government soon launched radical economic reforms, introducing free-market economy rules. The reform brought numerous advantageous effects: the very high inflation, represented in three-digit rates, was curtailed; the Polish zloty was gradually made a convertible currency; a Stock Exchange was established; and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises was initiated.

Changes in the economy curbed recession and led to the increasing economic growth rate in the following years. Simultaneously, these changes involved various social consequences. Some citizens decided to take their chance and established their own businesses. Many of them were successful; their living standard rose substantially and quickly. Those who were better educated and knew foreign languages found employment in foreign companies, emerging in an increasing number on the Polish market. This was another group that achieved success and benefited most from economic transformations.

These trends were, however, accompanied by negative side-effects. Large state-owned enterprises were facing bankruptcy or drastically reducing employment. Unemployment appeared as a phenomenon unknown in the times of real socialism. This was a problem that neither citizens nor public institutions were prepared to cope with. Moreover, the Ministry of Education was not able to prepare proposals for appropriate systemic measures.

Changes in the economy were coupled with reforms of the political system. The law governing elections to the *Sejm* was amended, with free democratic rules introduced for the election of deputies. Local governments were granted more extensive powers and thus made a real representation of local communities, appointed in democratic elections.

Censorship was abolished, and the media market was opened to free competition.

The report⁶ for the next session of the International Conference on Education was presented by the government appointed as a result of the Round Table agreements (spring 1989) and the elections involving the democratic opposition. Unlike the 1988 report, the one from 1990 was not prefaced with any introductory passage. Political and social changes that had taken place in Poland in 1989-1990 and their impact on the education system were dealt with in four general sentences.

„In 1989, Poland initiated major political, social and economic changes. Legal conditions emerged to create political pluralism, a multi-party system and democracy, and to strengthen civic rights. The educational policy of the State was also affected by these changes. There is a need for far-going restructuring of the education system in Poland“⁷.

⁶ Ministry of National Education, The Development of Education within 1989 - 1990, Report for the International Bureau of Education in Geneva, Warsaw, 1990.

⁷ Ibidem.

The text of the report offers hardly any explanation as to what such far-going restructuring should involve.

One would say that relatively little was changed in school education as compared to the fundamental changes which took place in Poland during that period. This may be explained by at least two reasons.

Firstly, in the years 1980-81 when the Solidarity trade union was still acting legally, teachers associated with the Union successfully enforced their demand to introduce some changes in curricula, primarily in history, civic education and the mother tongue. As a result, the so-called „blank spots“ were removed, which meant including in the curricula events from the recent history of Poland and Europe, earlier on omitted for ideological reasons. Despite the introduction of the martial law and the delegitimization of „Solidarity“, these changes were not reversed by the authorities.

The second factor curbing efforts to initiate reforms of education was the belief that the latter would require preparations and time to be implemented. Unlike the economy, education may not be treated with a shock therapy. This view could hardly be disputed.

Limited changes introduced in the very early 90-ties were primarily designed to eliminate arrangements and legal regulations linked with the communist ideology. These changes comprised the following:

- Adjusting curricula: eliminating elements of ideological indoctrination and biased view of history.
- Changing the status of the Russian language in the school curriculum. Russian was no longer a compulsory subject; previously, Russian courses were introduced for all primary school pupils in Class V and continued till the end of the primary school, in secondary schools as well as in higher education institutions.
- Creating conditions for the gradual introduction of foreign languages other than Russian into school education. These were only formal conditions as most schools suffered from a shortage of language teachers.
- Organising competitions for the posts of *kurators* in all provinces, and competitions for head teachers at the request of school communities. Representatives of local authorities and local communities were invited to sit on competition committees.
- Confirming the possibility for private persons, institutions and associations to establish and run schools, and for education in public schools to be provided on the basis of the so-called independently developed curricula.

Nursery Schools (Kindergartens)

As part of the reform of the political system designed to extend tasks and powers of local authorities, *gminas* were entrusted with the responsibility for running nursery schools. This meant that local governments took over the financing of nursery schools from their own budget within the scope defined by the Minister of National Education in the curriculum. At the same time, *gminas* were given the right to close down nursery schools.

Some consideration should also be given to side-effects of the decision to delegate the responsibility for running nursery schools to local governments. For many years nursery schools in Poland could not take in all children willing to attend due to the shortage of places available. This was particularly visible in large cities where decisions on admission of children to the nursery school were taken by special boards, assessing the child's family financial situation. These boards acted on the assumption that more affluent parents could find a place for their child in a private nursery school. The demand for pre-primary education resulted from its low price and the relatively high number of women in employment.

In the early 90-ties, as a result of the introduction of economic reforms, unemployment emerged as a new phenomenon in Poland. The Government and the Parliament were aware that this might undermine social support necessary for the effective implementation of the reforms. Thus, numerous legal regulations were adopted to reduce unemployment and prevent its undesirable consequences. One of the regulations provided for the extension of the period during which parents looking after small children were entitled to receive an allowance. As a result, on the one hand the costs related to the child's education in a nursery school increased as funds were not available in local government budgets to support the costs of children's stay in nursery schools. On the other hand, an alternative was to look after a child at home and take an allowance from the State budget. If this is coupled with difficulties in finding employment, it is clear that many parents chose the „cheaper“ option of looking after children at home.

This trend brought about the following undesirable consequences:

- a drop in the rate of children's participation in nursery schools and in the number of nursery schools, this being most noticeable in rural areas. As shown in the research carried out later on⁸, this is one of the key factors determining disparities in access to education. Children who have not

⁸ UNDP, *Report on Social Development*, Poland 98. Access to education, Warsaw, 1998.

- attended a nursery school achieve poorer results in the primary school, this affecting in turn adversely their further school career;
- a decline in women's economic activity.

Foreign Language Teacher Training Colleges

The greatest achievement in the area of education in the early 90-ties was the establishment of foreign language teacher training colleges. This new type of higher education institution in the Polish education system was set up primarily as a response to the need to promote foreign language teaching in Polish schools. The lines of the Ministry of National Education's policy in this area were described as follows in 1991⁹:

- promoting the teaching of one foreign language in primary schools and of two foreign languages in secondary schools,
- recognising the position of the English language as a universal means of international communication,
- promoting intensive courses and encouraging the earliest possible start of education by children.

The Ministry set the following long-term target: 100% of the society knows at least one foreign language, and 60% two languages.

To make the readers fully aware of the importance of establishing teacher training colleges, it should be recalled that teachers were trained in various faculties of higher education institutions as specialists in a given branch of knowledge who, however, were not well prepared to work in school. Elementary education teachers could acquire necessary qualifications by taking two-year post-secondary courses in the so-called teacher training institutes.

The basis for the establishment of foreign language teacher training colleges was provided by regulations of the Minister of National Education of 2 February and 6 June 1990. First fifty schools of this type were set up in October that year.

Courses in teacher training colleges last 3 years. Most of them are provided in a foreign language. It should be emphasised that 20% of the curriculum is reserved for the development of practical teaching skills. An important element of courses is a practical placement in school.

⁹ Hanna Komorowska, „Language Teaching and Teacher Training in Poland“ in „Changes in Poland, the Implications for Education“, Institute for Educational Research, Warsaw, 1991.

From the very beginning, teacher training colleges were involved in wide-ranging cooperation with foreign partners. This allowed them to employ foreign lecturers (native speakers), exchange experience, introduce innovative teaching methods and promote latest teaching approaches in school practice.

The following years saw the establishment of a number of new colleges either within university structures or as institutions run by local authorities. The latter could work under the methodological supervision of universities. In addition to colleges training foreign language teachers, other colleges were set up to train elementary education teachers, teachers of the Polish language, mathematics, natural sciences, etc. College graduates have no difficulty finding employment in schools, and are highly valued as specialists well prepared for their work.

One can hardly overestimate the importance of the establishment of teacher training colleges. As a result of this decision, a new model of teacher training was introduced as an alternative to that based on master-degree courses in universities. It turned out soon that this was the beginning of a wider process of diversification of higher education. Large higher education institutions existing for many years began to set up teacher training colleges within their structures. Simultaneously, study programmes in many faculties were changed so as to enable¹⁰ the student to obtain the degree of bachelor or engineer after three years of study. Those who have obtained the first degree may study for the master degree.

The same years saw the establishment of a large number of non-public higher education institutions. They were authorised by the Minister of National Education to provide only bachelor-degree courses as they were not prepared to offer master-degree courses in terms of staff and organisational requirements. Like teacher training colleges, non-public higher education institutions were often established in smaller towns where no universities existed. These initiatives attracted the support of local authorities which were right to see them as a chance for young people in their area to obtain higher education qualifications, and thus to boost the prestige of the town. Better educated inhabitants provide better conditions for investment in a given area (human capital), thus increasing chances for faster economic growth. This approach, shared by the Government and the Parliament, led to the adoption of the Act on Schools of Higher Vocational Education in June 1997.

¹⁰ Some faculties introduced a requirement for students to obtain the degree of bachelor (*licencjat*) after the third year of study.

Religious Education

In consultation with the Catholic Church, the Government decided to introduce religion into the school curriculum in 1990. Religion is an optional subject. The decision to attend a religion course is taken by parents (or legal guardian) for primary school pupils, and by pupils themselves in secondary school. The mark in religion does not determine the progression of the pupil to the next year. Where a group of interested pupils is large enough, the school should organise a course in ethics in parallel with that in religion.

Despite initial concerns that, in the country where ca 90% of citizens identify themselves as Catholics, the teaching of religion in school might lead to some discrimination of pupils of other denominations or non-believers, such undesirable phenomena were not recorded.

Vocational Schools

The fundamental economic changes mentioned earlier could not take place without affecting vocational education. Most enterprises which ran works-based schools refused to finance them. These establishments had to be taken over by the educational authorities. Moreover, enterprises which handed over works-based schools would not guarantee employment to their graduates. This meant a break-up of the model existing in the times of real socialism: qualifications acquired within a narrow specialisation would no longer guarantee life-long employment in one state-owned enterprise.

Another consequence was the increased burden for the school education budget, coupled by an unfortunate coincidence with a reduction of expenditure on education in the State budget.

However, the take-over of most vocational schools by the Ministry of National Education also brought about some desirable consequences as it initiated the process of transformations in this sector of school education.

Civic Schools

First non-public schools were already established in Poland in the late 80-ties. It was at that time that the Social Educational Association was set up which brought together parents, teachers and educational activists. The Society aimed at ensuring social participation in school education by increasing parents' influence on the life of public schools and establishing non-public schools. Those initiating the establishment of such schools pointed out that no legal regulation provided for the monopoly of the State in the area of education. And indeed, such monopoly had never existed as some schools had been

run by religious congregations before. However, the fact that the decision-makers (the communist party) agreed to give up at least a small part of their power was an indication of the weakening of the system, which was confirmed by the further course of events.

These schools, commonly called „civic“ to distinguish them from public and private profit-driven schools, though not numerous, played a major role as an important alternative to public schools. Moreover, they emerged as important centres for introduction of educational innovations.

As mentioned earlier, the Polish report for the 42nd Session of the International Conference of Education presents the education system where changes introduced are of rather limited scale. At that time, a debate was held on the aims of national education. One of them was to adopt the principle that needs related to the pupil's individual development were to be treated as a priority. As written by Anna Radziwiłł, vice-minister of education in the years 1989 - 1993¹¹:

„This is a fundamental change of the whole philosophy of the school. I think the awareness that the school should aim at personalism - where the human being, the pupil as a person and the teacher as a person, treated as an individual and a community member, give meaning to the whole school system - is the key achievement of the breakthrough in thinking about school education brought by the Solidarity“.

1992

The report for the 43rd session of the ICE states that the work is still underway to develop a model of the future Polish school. „This is not about changes in selected areas of school activities, but about a complete change of the model of the school. A vision of such a new model is yet to be developed in Poland“¹².

However, the information about the adoption of the School Education Act by the *Sejm* was dealt with casually or even as a marginal issue.

Act on the School Education System

The adoption of the Act was preceded with a discussion about values which the educational system in the Polish school should draw on. Reference to the Constitution was beyond dispute. However, Christian values proposed by some gave rise to concerns as to whether adopting them as the philosophical basis for the school system would not undermine the secular character of public education. On the other hand, objections were raised against the reference

¹¹ Anna Radziwiłł, „On school, education and politics“, WSiP, Warsaw, 1992.

¹² Ministry of National Education, The Development of Education in 1990 - 1991, Report for the International Bureau of Education in Geneva, Warsaw, 1992.

to the Declaration of Human Rights as leading to excessive liberalism in education. Looking from the today's perspective, that debate is hardly understandable. The arguments raised then seem peculiar or even ridiculous today. One should, however, remember, that Poland was only in the process of building its legal order after a great political breakthrough, often aptly described as 'regaining independence'. In the young democracy, fears of the dominance of any ideology were indeed strong (and justified). One should also note the somewhat eroded confidence in the United Nations system which was perceived by many politicians as dominated by the Soviet Union and serving its interests¹³. This approach affected in a way the reception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, a wider debate was held on philosophical premises for the legal system and the position of the individual and the citizen within the system.

As a result of the debate, the following wording was adopted in the introduction to the Act on the School Education System:

„Education in the Republic of Poland is a common welfare of the whole society; it is guided by the principles contained in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland as well as by the guidelines of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education and upbringing, respecting the Christian system of values, is based on universal ethical principles“.

It is interesting that the authors referred to the Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, though these are not directly applicable to education, but did not mention the Covenant of Social and Economic Rights. This may serve to illustrate the complicated process of correlating Polish law with standards adopted in the United Nations system.

The Act did not introduce any fundamental changes in the structure of the school education system or curricula. It did, however, create formal conditions for social participation in school education - increasing the influence of citizens and local communities on the life of schools. The Act provided for the establishment of school councils to be composed of representatives of teachers, parents and pupils in equal numbers. School councils were designed as advisory bodies and did not (and, in fact, still do not) have powers to make decisions concerning any important issues such as the appointment of head teachers, employment and dismissal of teachers, evaluation of their performance, school budget. In addition to school councils, the Act provided for the establishment of regional school education councils and the National School Education Council. These were designed as advisory bodies to be involved in the development of educational policy. Regional councils were to be appointed

¹³ These opinions seemed to be confirmed by the withdrawal of the United States and the United Kingdom from UNESCO.

on the basis of proposals from school councils, and the National Council on the basis of proposals from regional councils. Such proposals have never been submitted, and the provision in the Act has remained a dead letter.

Why was that so? Firstly, these were only the first years which saw the gradual emergence of a civic society where citizens assume the responsibility for various areas of social life; no models or experience in social management of education were available. Secondly, councils had limited powers and there were grounds for concerns that they would become only façade bodies legitimising decisions of the authorities. Moreover, this being the third reason, powers of the Ministry of Education and the regional educational authorities (*kuratoria*) were only slightly restricted. Major issues such as employment of teachers, organisation of the school network, amount of outlays and their allocation or curricula remained in the hands of the educational authorities.

Non-Public Schools

The Act on the School Education System provided a framework legitimising the establishment of non-public schools. Schools may be set up and run by natural persons, institutions or social organisations following an entry into a register kept by the *kurator*. An application for entry into the register should contain, among other things, information about qualifications of teachers and the head teacher as well as the statutes of the school. A non-public school may apply to be granted rights of a public school (to issue national certificates). In this case, an application for entry into the register should contain a commitment whereby the school undertakes to comply with specific requirements of the Act, and in particular:

- to implement a curriculum;
- to apply rules for assessment and progression of pupils, and those for setting examinations;
- to employ teachers of compulsory subjects who hold qualifications as specified for public school teachers.

Non-public schools received¹⁴ a grant amounting to 50% of current expenditure incurred per pupil in public schools of the same type. Non-public primary schools received grants from the *gmina* budget, and post-primary schools from the State budget.

By providing a legal and financial basis for the activities of non-public schools, the Act broke definitively the monopoly of the State in education. Elements of competition and innovative approaches of non-public schools are a good incentive for public schools.

¹⁴ The relevant provision in the Act was changed in 2000, and at present the grant amounts to 100% of current expenditure incurred per pupil in public schools.

Vocational Education

The report also contains information about activities undertaken by the Ministry of National Education in the area of vocational education. These included the following:

- introducing changes in curricula for subjects related to economy;
- introducing into curricula modern Western Europe foreign languages (this decision being difficult to implement due to the shortage of teachers);
- introducing an optional subject „Elements of Informatics“;
- introducing 76 independently developed curricula and advancing the work on curricular documentation corresponding to the new classification of occupations.

These changes were only to a slight extent meeting the needs of a reform of vocational education, a sector which urgently required to be adjusted to conditions and needs of the market economy. Moreover, it was difficult to implement these changes due to financial problems, the shortage of staff and, above all, little interest shown by social partners (employers and trade unions).

Modifications in Curricula

In 1990, the Ministry of National Education was faced with a new challenge: the lack of money. One of the key aims of economic policy was to maintain hard budgetary discipline and to reduce the deficit to the minimum. The Ministry of Finance did not approve any spending beyond the expenditure budgeted for. However, schools and the educational authorities were not prepared to follow such restrictive rules in drawing up their budgets. Until then the school education budget was drafted mainly on the basis of expenditure in the previous year and a school work plan submitted by the head teacher to the educational authorities for approval at the beginning of each school year. The plan contained proposals for dividing pupils into classes and groups (for physical education, foreign languages and laboratory work). It was assessed by the educational authorities mainly with respect to its compliance with the legislation (e.g. the minimum number of pupils in a branch, the teaching load for teachers). No consideration was given to the question of rationalising expenses or looking for ways to make savings; this was so because in case funds were not available to cover school education expenses, the State would print extra money without worrying that this would fuel inflation.

The Ministry of Finance took steps designed to limit - and thus to rationalise - expenditure on school education. At the stage of drafting the budget for 1991, it was assumed that the employment in the whole so-called budgetary sector would be reduced by 5%. Cuts were also made in the school education budget. Implementing these guidelines, the Ministry of National Education issued

a regulation (August 1991) whereby schools were required to limit the number of teaching hours either by reducing the number of lessons for individual subjects or by combining classes, or by not dividing classes into groups. The number of lessons in each classes was to be reduced by 4 hours per week. However, schools were not allowed to give up the teaching of any subject or to eliminate the division of classes into groups for physical education or foreign language lessons.

Extracurricular activities could be organised only on condition that the school was able to finance them from non-budgetary revenues at its disposal.

It's worth noting that the above-mentioned Regulation allowed the *kurator* to exempt schools from applying the Regulation where this was at variance with the provisions of the Teachers' Charter. The Regulation shows how great is the power of the teachers' trade unions based on the Teachers' Charter.

These austerity measures, and in particular the reduction of the number of hours allocated to individual subjects, forced the Ministry of National Education to publish the so-called minimum curriculum requirements. This was a document which defined the scope of compulsory teaching contents to be covered in general subjects. Since schools implemented the austerity programme in different ways, adopting various organisational arrangements and often developing their own curricula, it was necessary to define a common scope of curricular contents. And this was called the minimum curriculum requirements. The concept of the minimum curriculum requirements was developed in the following years and served to design a core curriculum.

1994

The only information on reforms or innovations given in the report for the Session of the International Conference on Education in 1994 is a reference to the opening of a four-year technical lyceum, a new type of secondary vocational school. The school provided general secondary education courses, giving students the possibility to obtain the maturity certificate and to complete general vocationally oriented education covering a selected sector of the economy (specialised section). The following specialised sections were set up in the technical lyceum: economy and finance, electrical and power engineering, chemistry, environmental engineering, mechanical engineering and technology, agriculture and food, services and economy, administration and business support services, social sector and services, electronics, wood technology and forestry, steel industry and metallurgy, textile and clothing industry, communication and transport.

The report does not mention a major political decision which was taken by the Parliament shortly after the elections in 1993. A provision in the Act on the School Education System was then amended whereby local governments (*gminas*) were to take over the responsibility for running primary schools as from 1 January 1994. The intention to delegate the responsibility for schools to local governments stemmed from the strategy of increasing social participation in education, implemented from the early 90-ties. However, politicians who gained majority in the *Sejm* concluded that *gminas* were not prepared to run schools. To support their view, they were also pointing to undesirable developments linked with the process of delegating the responsibility for nursery schools to *gminas*, which resulted in closing down some of these establishments. Ultimately, the decision to halt the process of decentralisation of school education management was not taken; only the date for the take-over was postponed for two years (1996).

At the same time, *gminas* were left with the option of voluntarily taking over from the State the responsibility for running primary schools. This option was taken up by most affluent *gminas* which could contribute funds from their own budgets to increase the amounts allocated to education within a State-budget subsidy. Needless to say, working conditions and the quality of educational provision (extracurricular activities, foreign language teaching) varied as a result from one *gmina* to another, and differences in terms of access to education widened between various regions in the country.

1996

The report presented at the 45th Session of the International Conference on Education in 1996 is most extensive of all those prepared during the decade of the 90-ties. It contains a very detailed description of all aspects of the education system, including management, financing, curricula. Higher education is discussed fairly extensively.

The authors of the report begin by referring in the introduction to findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada in 1995¹⁵. This survey revealed shortcomings of education in Poland, and its findings were repeatedly quoted in the following years as an argument in favour of implementing fundamental reforms in the education system.

Other findings presented in 1995 were those from a review of the Polish educational policy carried out by OECD.

¹⁵ OECD and STATISTICS CANADA (1995) *Literacy, Economy nad Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey*, Paris, Ottawa.

In the part describing reforms designed at that time, the report refers to a document prepared by the Ministry of National Education¹⁶. It is worth quoting an excerpt from this study concerning core curricula. The Ministry intended to improve the quality of education through the following steps:

- *developing core curricula which will define the canon for general education by setting its priority targets at various levels of school education, aims of teaching basic subjects as well as requirement standards allowing to fix criteria for school marks;*
- *introducing gradually alternative curricula (new curricula are designed so as to indicate to teachers ways for implementing educational tasks set in the core curriculum);*
- *preparing and introducing a reform of the system for assessing pupil achievements, which would establish uniform and clear criteria for pupil assessment, and a reform of the national examination system.*

Core curricula

Core curricula should be discussed in more detail as they became the fabric of the curricular reform carried out in Poland.

In accordance with the amended Act on the School Education System, the Minister of National Education was obliged to lay down core curricula for compulsory general subjects. Such a document would define tasks for public schools. This is a major difference because schools were previously required to implement curricula and timetables designed centrally or, in other words, to cover the pre-defined contents within a given time. The core curriculum defined the knowledge and skills that pupils should be equipped with, i.e. the outcome or end result of the teaching process. It is important in this context that, in addition to knowledge, emphasis was also placed on the development of pupils' skills and competences. This was linked with changes introduced in various countries which aimed to ensure that those graduating from various types of schools were able to use in practice the knowledge acquired in the course of education. To some extent, this was also prompted by the above mentioned findings from the literacy survey. Some areas of competence which the pupil should develop in school covered the issues related to the preparation for proper and responsible participation in a modern democratic society.

Since the core curriculum was designed only to lay down a general framework, the so-called canon of school tasks, it was assumed in the curricular reform that a set of alternative curricula would be available for teachers to

¹⁶ „Policy of the Ministry of National Education in the area of human resources development. Achievements, aims and barriers”, Ministry of National Education, Warsaw, December 1995.

choose from. Curricula admitted for use in school, included in a special list, would have to meet certain criteria. It was also assumed that teachers would be creative in using the curricula available, adapting them to specific conditions in a given school. Moreover, schools and individual teachers could develop their own curricula. With the adoption of such arrangements implying the decentralisation of responsibility, the State was faced with entirely new tasks as bearing the ultimate responsibility for the quality of the education system. This required the examination system to be changed.

It was assumed that a new system of assessment and school examinations would be based on requirement standards to be fixed centrally. Examinations would be set by an institution to be specially appointed for this purpose by the Ministry of Education. Such an arrangement should facilitate international comparability and equivalence of certificates.

Management and Financing

As from 1 January 1996, all primary schools in Poland are run by *gminas*, with *kurators* exercising the so-called pedagogical supervision. The 1st of January 1996 was also the date when the responsibility for post-primary schools in 46 largest cities was delegated to their local governments under a pilot programme.

Gminas' powers in the area of running schools cover financing and administration. *Gminas* finance educational establishments in their area from a State-budget subsidy and their own revenues. The amount of a subsidy was calculated annually on the basis of a formula (algorithm) fixed by the Ministry of National Education. The formula for the allocation of funds should be agreed with local governments within the framework of the Joint Central and Local Government Commission. The key factors determining the amount of the subsidy were the number of pupils, the type of school, the type of *gmina* (with village *gminas* being privileged), and the number and qualifications of teachers. Moreover, limits were introduced that defined the extent to which a subsidy for a given *gmina* for the next year might change as compared to the subsidy in the previous year. While ensuring some stability for local government budgets, this regulation did also give rise to irregularities. Where, for example, the number of pupils in a *gmina* dropped significantly, this was not followed by a proportional reduction in the amount of a subsidy.

Many *gminas* contributed large amounts to their inadequate school education budgets, thus creating better conditions for pupils and teachers.

The head teacher (appointed through competition) had considerable latitude and a fairly wide scope of powers. He/She was responsible for the staff policy and pedagogical supervision of teachers. In theory, the head teacher could

manage the school budget. In practice, the funds received from the body running the school (*gmina or kuratorium*) were allocated for the financing of specific tasks. Teachers' salaries, limited by relevant regulations, were the largest item. The head teacher had nothing to say in this matter. However, he/she (or, in fact, the school teachers' council) had much more extensive powers as regards managing the so-called „special fund“, i.e. money obtained by the school from for example renting classrooms.

Accurate data concerning parents' contribution to the financing of education are not available. The increasing financial burden taken on by parents is a trend analysed in the report¹⁷ only indirectly, through household expenses analysed by the Central Statistical Office. As shown by the analysis, these expenses grew by 41.4% per person between 1993 and 1994, with the most significant increase in rural families (over 60%).

Competence test

In 1996, as a pilot initiative and in a small scale (only in one province), an entrance examination to secondary schools was replaced with a competence test at the end of primary school. The experiment was successful. Pupils were glad to be given an opportunity to take their first written examination in the school career in their own (primary) schools. It turned out that many of them passed the test with sufficiently good results to be admitted to a secondary school, though they had not planned to apply for admission there earlier on. And many pupils actually used that chance. Good results achieved by a large group of primary school leavers encouraged the authorities of the province to accelerate structural changes. The number of places available in secondary schools, and lyceums in particular, was increased at the expense of vocational schools. Since the test was taken by all final year pupils, regardless of their educational aspirations, primary school teachers and the educational authorities obtained reliable information about the performance of schools. Secondary school students selected through the competence test did not encounter any special difficulties in secondary schools. This confirmed the effectiveness and relevance of such a selection method and dispelled fears among secondary school teachers.

In the following year (1997), the experiment was extended to cover the whole Wałbrzych province as well as ca 25 000 pupils in other provinces.

1997 - 1998

In autumn 1997, parliamentary elections were held in Poland. As a result, the coalition in power changed, and a new government was established which pro-

¹⁷ „Development of education in Poland. The report prepared by the Ministry of National Education, Republic of Poland“, Warsaw, 1996.

ceeded vigorously with the implementation of 4 reforms: social security, public administration, health protection and education.

The aims and preliminary concept of the reform of the education system were defined in a policy document, presented by the Minister of National Education in January 1998. The following goals were set for the reform¹⁸:

- raising the level of education in the society by increasing the number of those holding secondary and higher education qualifications;
- ensuring equal educational opportunities;
- supporting improvement in the quality of education viewed as an integral process of upbringing and instructing.

The necessity to carry out a comprehensive reform of the education system was justified in the document by:

- the lack of capacity within the existing education system to adapt to the pace and scope of cultural and social change;
- the crisis of the educational role of the school resulting from the predominance of the transmission of information over the development of skills and the shaping of personality;
- the lack of equal opportunities in the access to education at all its levels and the low percentage of young people completing secondary and higher education;
- the necessity to adapt vocational education to the changing needs of the market economy;
- the need to establish closer links between schools at all levels and the family as well as the local community.

The reform was envisaged to cover the following areas:

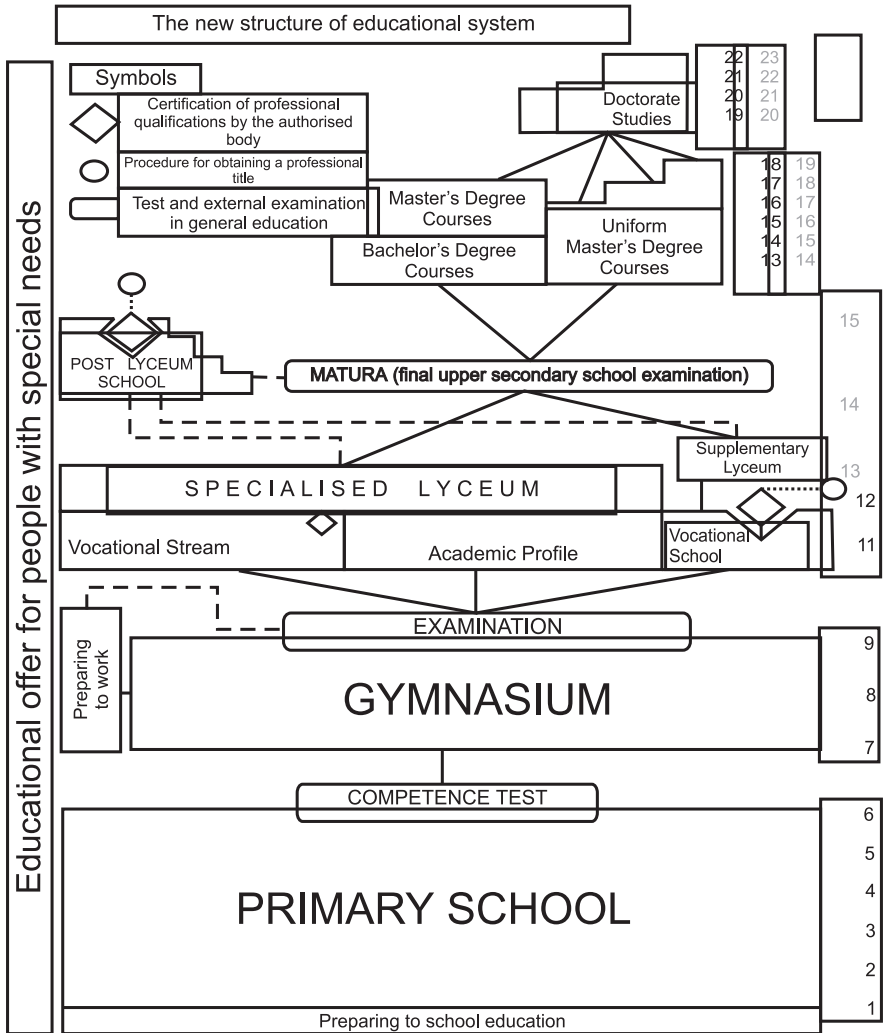
- the structure of the education system ranging from the nursery school up to doctorate studies, including particularly the introduction of a new structure of the school system;
- changes in the methods of administration and supervision;
- a curricular reform comprising the introduction of core curricula and changes in the organisation and methods of teaching;
- the establishment of an assessment and examination system independent of the school;
- the financing of schools;
- the identification of qualification requirements for teachers which would also be linked with their promotion paths and the system of remuneration at an adequately high level.

¹⁸ Ministry of National Education, „Reform of the education system - proposal“, WSiP, Warsaw, 1998.

As shown above, the plan presented a reform covering all aspects of the education system. Proposals for specific arrangements were centred on school education. The Minister of National Education declared that fundamental changes would also be prepared and introduced in higher education, but these aims have been achieved only partially.

Structural Reform

A change in the structure of the school education system, including the introduction of the gymnasium as a new type of schools, was most visible to the society and became a symbol of the whole reform (see new structure).



It was decided that the previous structure of education, comprising the eight-year primary school followed by the four-year secondary school or the three-year vocational school as an option to be chosen, would be replaced with a system described in brief as „6+3+3". This meant that the duration of education in the primary school would be reduced to 6 years. Following the educational cycle in the primary school, the pupil would continue his/her education in a three-year gymnasium, and only upon completion of education in the gymnasium would he/she move on to a three-year secondary school (specialised lyceum) or a two-year vocational school. The structural reform separated small children from young people. It postponed the choice of the direction of education at the secondary level (general or vocational stream) for one year. With the clear division of the whole school education into stages, pupil achievements could be assessed reliably through tests and examinations.

The reformers assumed that gymnasia would allow to raise the level of education in rural areas. These schools should be larger (at least 150 pupils), well equipped and employ teachers with adequate qualifications. Since the number of pupils in the school varies with the school-catching area, the establishment of gymnasia involved unavoidably the reorganisation of the school network.

Far-going transformations were also envisaged for the secondary school. It was assumed that most, i.e. 80%, of those graduating from gymnasia would continue their education in lyceums, and 20% would opt for a two-year vocational school. Technical secondary schools would disappear completely from the Polish school education landscape, and lyceums would establish „specialisations". Lyceum students would be given the choice between the so-called academic option, preparing them to take up higher education courses, and the vocational option, providing them with introductory vocational training to take up employment. Those completing education in a specialised vocational lyceum would not obtain any formal vocational qualifications. Graduates would need to acquire them in post-secondary schools, at courses or at a workplace.

Since the two-year vocational school did not offer its students the possibility to take the maturity examination, two-year supplementary lyceums would be established to enable those graduating from such schools to continue their education.

The structural reform did not cover nursery schools and did not result in the lowering of the compulsory school age (7 years).

Many people were voicing doubts as to whether the structural reform was indeed necessary. The arguments given to justify the need for change were twofold. Firstly, the new division of the school career stages would allow better

adjustment of teaching methods and curricula to the specific needs of pupils of various ages. Secondly, a structural reform would need to be linked with a curricular reform. Otherwise conservative teachers resisting the reform might wave proposals for curricular changes aside and continue to teach their pupils - as they had for many years - following exactly the same patterns. However, a structural reform could hardly „pass unnoticed“. It would be difficult to teach the old way in a new school. Thus, the idea was to provide an impulse to deep reflection in teachers' communities and to bring about actual changes in teaching contents and styles.

Curricular Reform

After many years of complaining about overloaded curricula and disputes about possible ways out, the decision was taken to implement a concept of core curricula developed earlier on. The concept aimed to provide schools with an extensive scope of autonomy and responsibility; schools were to build their own curriculum within a pre-determined general framework while balancing three dimensions of education: acquiring knowledge, developing skills and shaping attitudes. The curricular reform was designed not only to bring a change in the contents of school education and to encourage the introduction of innovative teaching methods, but above all to change the teaching philosophy and culture of schools. Instead of following instructions of the educational authorities passively, teachers were expected to come up with their own curricula that would be best suited to the needs of their pupils. Teachers were thus faced with entirely new tasks.

System of Examinations and Tests

The introduction of a curricular reform based on far-going decentralisation required that a system for the collection of information and the monitoring of the school education system be implemented simultaneously. It was therefore decided that common compulsory tests assessing pupil achievements should be organised at the end of education in the primary school and at the end of education in the gymnasium. School education would culminate with the maturity examination taken upon completion of education in the lyceum. All these examinations were to be organised, set and corrected by the central examination board and regional examination boards, new institutions to be set up as part of the reform.

Such a system of examinations and tests, covering 100% of the population in primary schools and gymnasias and the target 80% of students in lyceums, ensures thorough and reliable monitoring of the school education system.

Management, Financing, Supervision

The change of the administrative division of the country, introduced together with the school education reform, encouraged the transfer of responsibility for running schools to local governments. *Gminas* (the lowest local government level) were the units which would run primary schools and gymnasia (the latter to be taken over in the future), whereas *powiats* (local government units at the level above *gminas*) would be responsible for lyceums, vocational schools and special education schools. The State would provide funds for school financing, supplementing *gminas'* own revenues with an appropriately calculated subsidy. The key factors determining the amount of subsidy would be the cost of education per pupil in a given type of school and the number of pupils. It was assumed that this approach would allow to put into practice the idea of educational voucher.

As a result of delegating the responsibility for schools to local governments, kurators were left only with the task of pedagogical supervision.

Implementation

The reform was prepared and implemented in a flash. The Minister of National Education presented a preliminary concept of the reform in January 1998; in September next year, gymnasia were already set up and the curricular reform introduced in primary schools. Still earlier, on 1 January 1999, secondary schools were taken over by the newly established *powiats*. *Kuratoria* were reorganised, their number being reduced from 49 to 16 as a result of the administrative reform. Given the pace of transformations, some undesirable side-effects were unavoidable.

As the first challenge to be faced, teaching programmes for the school classes covered by the reform would have to be designed and, more importantly, new textbooks developed and printed properly and in time. The free market turned out to be helpful in solving this problem. Grasping the excellent chance offered to them by the curricular reform as all pupils in 5-years range covered by the reform would need to buy new textbooks, publishers offered a good range of teaching programmes and textbooks based on proposals for the core curriculum.

Further difficulties emerged during the reorganisation of the school network in connection with the establishment of gymnasia. The structural reform „had pulled out“ two classes of pupils from primary schools; as a result, the number of pupils in many schools dropped so that it was no longer economically justifiable to keep these establishments open. Though the principle „money follows the pupil“ was implemented simultaneously, local communities in rural areas

would not consent to schools being closed down. Parents were concerned about transportation to schools and the quality of education, and upbringing in particular, in larger schools. Some did even resort to strikes, refuse to send their children to school or occupy school premises.

Problems with the reorganisation of the school network revealed shortcomings in the preparatory work for the reform. One of the key objectives for changes was to ensure equal educational opportunities, in particular for young people in rural areas. Yet, no thorough analysis was carried out to identify reasons underlying disparities in access to school education. It was assumed that well equipped modern gymnasia would become a remedy for the problem; supervised by highly qualified educators, young people in gymnasia would discover and develop their interests and abilities, preparing for further study in lyceums. No consideration was, however, given to the fact that greater decentralisation implied greater differentiation of local educational establishments. While affluent *gminas* established large and well-equipped gymnasia, poor ones confined themselves to setting up gymnasium branches based at primary schools. Such branches could in no way be equipped properly, e.g. with computers, or fill all jobs with highly qualified teachers.

Such a wide-ranging reform required a nationwide pool of properly trained teachers. Given the pace at which changes were introduced in Poland, it was not possible to reserve sufficient time for training new teachers. Therefore, tremendous efforts were made to provide in-service training to the largest possible group of teachers. The Ministry of National Education supplied special funds which were awarded through competition in the form of grants to institutions and organisations offering teacher training courses.

Serious problems arose along with the introduction of a new system of promotion and remuneration for teachers. The system presupposes significant differentials in teachers' salaries, these to be determined mainly by qualifications and, to a lesser extent, by the seniority. To calculate the costs related to the introduction of the new remuneration system, it was assumed that the number of teachers would drop as a result of the decreasing number of pupils (demographic decline) and the reorganisation of the school network. However, instead of reducing employment, local governments in *gminas* did even employ a larger number of teachers in connection with the establishment of gymnasia. Since, in accordance with the Constitution, it is the responsibility of the State to provide funds for the functioning of schools (and teachers' salaries in particular), local governments demanded increased subsidies. The pool of funds available was not sufficient to satisfy all demands; consequently, local authorities in many *gminas* had to take on credits in order to pay salaries to their teachers. These loans were paid off by the State budget together with interests.

Undoubtedly, the reception of the school education reform in the society was adversely affected by tensions related to the reorganisation of the school network and problems with the timely payment of teachers' increased salaries. And further serious changes are due to take place soon (2002), when the first year of gymnasium leavers enters specialised lyceums and vocational schools. 2002 will also be the year in which first tests will be set in Class VI of the primary school and Class III in the gymnasium, and the maturity examination will for the first time be organised, in accordance with the new rules, by external examination boards.

Description of the Polish school education system in 2001

Curriculum

The reform has changed entirely the rules and legal framework defining what and how should be taught in Polish schools. New mechanisms have been established which strengthen the process of empowerment, extend the autonomy of schools and teachers, and create conditions for schools to respond quickly and flexibly to both local needs and ever more challenging tasks of a wider nature.

The following are laid down by the Minister of National Education in a relevant regulation:

- core curricula (for pre-primary education, general education, vocational education),
- framework timetables in public schools,
- requirements for admission of curricula to use in school.

The three documents mentioned above provide a framework for the reformed system of school education. It is based on the principle of school autonomy. Schools are free to decide the scope and methods for implementation of their curricular contents. Let us emphasise that the curriculum is determined by schools themselves. This is therefore a decision taken jointly by a collective body of teachers (and not a „sum" of individual decisions), following consultations with parents and taking into account pupils' needs, conditions in the school and specific local conditions (tradition, local dialect, etc.).

The school career is divided into three-year educational stages related to phases of the natural development of pupils:

- classes I to III of the primary schools: elementary integrated teaching,
- classes IV to VI of the primary school: block-based teaching,
- gymnasium: subject-based teaching introducing pupils to individual academic areas,
- specialised lyceum: subject-based teaching.

The above-mentioned regulations have introduced some new concepts to the official language, thus sanctioning innovative activities often undertaken in Polish schools for many years. Among these concepts are: „integrated teaching“, „subject blocks“, „educational paths“ (contents which may be covered during

courses in various subjects or subject blocks). Another term consistently used in official documents is „educational activities“, which gives schools the possibility of organising their work in various ways, going beyond the traditional division of the teaching time into lessons.

The core curriculum for each of the three educational cycles defines aims and tasks of the school, lays down the canon of contents which should be included in the course of teaching, and specifies expected pupil achievements. The core curriculum does not predetermine the ways in which the stated aims and tasks should be achieved.

And this is how the core curriculum is described by Anna Radziwiłł¹⁹:

„This document is based on the following assumptions:

- it is a framework document; it defines in a general way „educational meanings“ of individual stages in education and (...) subjects, subject blocks or sets of contents and tasks (e.g. media education, philosophical education, ecological education);*
- on the one hand, it is designed to ensure the uniformity of the Polish education system by defining clearly its common foundations; on the other hand, it should leave space for the autonomy of those developing detailed curricula and for activities to be undertaken autonomously by individual teachers and teachers' teams;*
- it introduces a concept of education understood as the transmission of information, development of skills and assistance in discovering values as integrally linked with one another rather than „the implementation of curricular items“ (...);*
- (...) it develops issues which make it easier to deal with modern changes in civilisation and to function in the surrounding reality;*
- based on the assumption that the school could not in any case „teach“ everything, it brings „learning to learn“, perceiving new information, finding one's way in new situations, in the fast changing world, into the focus of education“.*

The core curriculum lays down a framework for other more detailed regulations.

- Framework timetables define only the minimum number of hours which should be allocated to individual courses within a three-year educational cycle. The responsibility for the development of a detailed timetable for a given branch (class) rests with the school. Such a timetable should take into account conditions in which the school works (e.g. existence of com-*

¹⁹ Ministry of National Education (Reform Topics Series), „Ministry of National Education on the curricular reform: integrated teaching“, Warsaw, April 1999.

bined classes), pupils' needs (their interests and gaps in the contents covered by them) and financial capacities (increase in the number of hours).

- A teaching programme is a description of detailed educational objectives, contents to be taught to pupils, ways for achieving the objectives, and target pupil achievements and their assessment. A teaching programme is admitted to use in school by the Minister of National Education. A list of teaching programmes admitted to use is regularly published in the Official Journal. All teachers and all schools may use them freely: in whole, in part or adapting them to their needs.

A major role in the development of new teaching programmes is played by publishing houses which offer textbooks, handbooks for pupils, guides for teachers and, increasingly often, multimedia publications for a given (their own) curriculum.

Teachers may also implement their own independently developed teaching programme if it complies with the core curriculum.

- A school set of teaching programmes is adopted on the basis of a joint decision taken by all teachers working in the school. This is intended to ensure the integrity of the teaching process through the proper correlation between individual subjects and the coordination of teaching at individual levels. With this formal requirement, teachers are encouraged or even obliged to establish closer and better cooperation.

System of examinations

The Central Examination Board and regional examination boards have been established pursuant to the amended Act on the School Education System. The Act also defines tasks of the boards²⁰.

The tasks of the Central Examination Board include in particular:

- 1) drafting proposals for requirement standards which are the basis for setting tests and examinations in cooperation with the sector ministries concerned, higher education institutions, research and development units, employers' organisations and professional self-governing bodies;
- 2) analysing results of test and examinations, and submitting to the minister of education annual reports on the level of pupil achievements at the individual levels of education;
- 3) developing and promoting in-service teacher training programmes in the area of diagnosis and assessment of pupil learning achievements;
- 4) encouraging scientific research and innovations in the area of assessment and examination;
- 5) keeping a register of regional examination board examiners.

²⁰ The Act of 25 July 1998 amending the Act of the School Education System, www.men.waw.pl.

The tasks of regional examination boards include in particular:

- 1) setting tests and examinations;
- 2) preparing examination tasks and tests;
- 3) analysing results of tests and examinations, and formulating conclusions;
- 4) drawing up reports on tests and examinations held, and forwarding them to head teachers, bodies running schools, *kurators* and the Central Examination Board;
- 5) training candidates for examiners;
- 6) cooperating with other regional examination boards and the Central Examination Board.

As from the year 2002²¹, the following examinations will be held in the Polish school education system: a test in Class VI of the primary school, a test upon completion of education in the gymnasium, and the maturity examination upon completion of education in the secondary school.

The first two examinations will be common and compulsory and, while not determining the pupil's school career (the completion of education in the school will not be conditional upon the result in the examination), will provide valuable information about individual schools and the whole education system. All examinations will be organised, set and marked by regional examination boards.

Structure

The school education system is currently under transformation. As a result, the new reformed types of schools are at present working in parallel with those based on the principles of the old system. The table below²² shows the timetable for the implementation of organisational changes in the school education system.

Schools of the reformed system are presented below. A description of the old system may be found in the Polish report for the 45th session of the International Conference on Education. One should, however, bear in mind that whereas primary schools and gymnasias are already functioning, specialised lyceums and (reformed) vocational schools will be open in 2002, and supplementary lyceums only in 2004.

²¹ Some political groups declare that, in case they come to power after the 2001 elections, they will change the date for the first reformed maturity examination.

²² Based on: Ministry of National Education, „Reform of the education system: postgymnasium education”, Warsaw, April 2000.

School	Class	1999/ 2000	2000/ 2001	2001/ 2002	2002/ 2003	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006
Primary school	I							
	II							
	III							
	IV							
	V							
	VI							
	VII							
	VIII							
Gymnasium	I							
	II							
	III							
General Lyceum	I							
	II							
	III							
	IV							
Specialised lyceum	I							
	II							
	III							
Technical secondary school (TSS)	I							
	II							
	III							
	IV							
	V							
Basic vocational school (BVS)	I							
	II							
	III							
TSS following BVS	I							
	II							
	III							
Vocational school	I							
	II							
Supplementary lyceum	I							
	II							



- Curricular reform in primary school classes



- Newly established classes in schools working under the reformed system



- Classes under the old system