

# CENTRAL EUROPE

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## CURRICULUM REFORM IN POLAND: PUTTING NEW NEEDS INTO AN OLD SYSTEM

Amongst the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, Poland has perhaps been the most successful in its post-1989 attempts to be considered part of world capitalist order and of Western rather than Eastern Europe (with the Czech Republic as another strong candidate for this position). Likely membership of both NATO and the European Community within the next five years are just two indicators of this success. The country has been determined to move itself westwards, economically, ideologically and culturally, while erecting a large sign on its eastern borders declaring, "No connection with the firm next door." The geographical position of Poland has certainly helped with this move, but it should also be noted that many Poles have long regarded themselves as historically part of the west, not the east. In support of this claim, several Poles have pointed out to me the use of the Latin rather than Cyrillic alphabet, the dominance of the Roman Catholic rather than the Orthodox Church, a history of artistic and intellectual links with Western Europe (notably France) and the existence of a considerable Polish diaspora in the rest of Europe and the USA. (Is it significant that LOT, the Polish national airline, assigns number 001 to its Warsaw-Chicago flight?) Linguistic and cultural ties with Russia in particular are played down. For many Poles, then, the changes through which the country has gone since 1989 (or even earlier) are not just about defining a new direction for Poland, but also about reaffirming Poland's historical position in Europe. They offer an opportunity to "modernise" the country while at the same time allowing the resurgence of a Poland built on its own cultural terms, rather than those imposed by an outside power – only the second such opportunity in two hundred years.

Kozma (1992) maintains that these two strands have been visible in all former Soviet-bloc countries since 1989: a "neo-liberalism" based on closer economic and ideological integration with Western Europe on the one hand, and a "neo-conservatism" based on nationalism and a return to traditional-religious values on the other. The Polish situation, at least, is undoubtedly more complex than this simple dichotomy suggests, but these two tendencies are both clearly in evidence. For the present, the "liberals" probably have the upper hand (surprisingly, often represented by former communist party members), but the immediate future remains uncertain. The see-saw changes in political leadership since 1989 and the ongoing, heated debate over the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the country are just two indications that the precise form of the new and future Poland remains

contested. At present, however, there does seem to be a consensus among the majority for "democracy and a free market economy": a new political/ideological system and a new economic order, both demanding a move away from the old patterns of central control. For some, these two terms are inseparable (e. g. Pachocinski 1993): Poland has rejoined the liberal democracies at a time when an unfettered free market is the economic orthodoxy. Reforms in the country have essentially been aimed at supporting these two transformations, by means of privatisation in the economic sphere and decentralisation in the political.

### Early curriculum reforms

As in other aspects of civic life, so in education. Reforms in Polish education reflect the perceived need for it to support the transitions to democracy and a capitalist economy. The former has taken the form of curricular changes to remove "ideological indoctrination" and structural changes to redefine the loci of control. To support the shift to free market capitalism, ways of promoting education as preparation of individuals for the new phenomenon of a labour market are being sought. While there is general agreement over the need for reform in education, there is less certainly and less consensus over the precise nature of the initiatives that will best meet these two strands of intended purpose. The rapidity of the change process in the wider social and economic spheres has certainly made educational response rather than proactive. Economic constraints have limited the scope for action, but perhaps just as significant has been the absence of educational research data and of administrative and managerial structures capable of planning and implementing wide-scale, innovative reform. The inherited control system was highly centralised and designed to enforce the implementation of centrally produced regulations. System maintenance, rather than system development was the chief concern.

The earliest post-1989 curriculum reforms were in the areas of civics and history education and the teaching of foreign languages. In 1990, the old civic education syllabus in which "Indoctrination had been the essence" was replaced by a new one "that would prepare young people to function in a democratic society" (Janowski 1992: 48). Changes in the history syllabus were, in practice, relatively minor. The ideological distortions in this subject were seen to comprise the omission of certain historical "facts", and the insertion of these was a relatively simple matter, together with the reinterpretation of others seen as distortions of the "truth". The nature of historical facts as facts, or of history as a subject of study, were not seen as issues.

The major change in foreign language teaching was the large-scale abandonment of Russian and its replacement by English (primarily), French and German. As Janowski (1992) points out, there was an element of reaction in the 1989/90 legislation that made the teaching of Russian no longer compulsory, since this had been largely ineffective in the face of public apathy. In the decade prior to 1989, however, there had been rapid growth in the out-of-school teaching of English language, and the expansion of English teaching provision in schools can also be seen as a reaction to demand and a recognition of the existing reality. In practice it has proved very difficult to provide enough teachers of English, both because of the

enormous demand within the school system and because of a continuous drain of qualified teachers to the more lucrative out-of-school market.

The earlier curriculum reforms also recognised the overcrowded, encyclopaedic nature of the Polish curriculum and the content of many subject syllabuses was quickly reduced. These new syllabuses were intended to provide opportunities for innovation by individual teachers by defining a minimum rather than a total syllabus content. The intention was that teachers would "top up" this minimum with content chosen to meet local interests and/or demands. With severely underpaid and poorly motivated teachers having no previous experience of choosing their own content, this may have been something over an over-optimistic move and it is not clear that it led to much innovative practice. Discussions with individual teachers suggests that the actual content of most lessons remained much as it always had been, although I have met others who clearly were attempting to innovate. Although reduced in content, most syllabuses remained essentially knowledge-based, encouraging the absorption of large numbers of facts, laws and principles, but paying little if any attention to application, problem-solving, independent thought or creativity. There was an awareness that such an approach was dysfunctional in supporting the new political and economic goals, but there was less certainly and no experience of just how changes should be made.

### Education for a new economy

Making the education system more suited to the anticipated demands of a modern labour market has been much more of a challenge. Once again there have been significant client-led changes that have pre-empted official planning. The most obvious has been the growth in demand for academic and technical secondary education, accompanied by a steep decline in enrolments in basic vocational schools. These three – academic, technical and vocational schools – are the options open to Polish students at the end of the compulsory eight-year elementary cycle. During the communist era, the basic vocational schools, which provide training and certification for a specific occupation, attracted between 50 % and 60 % of elementary school leavers (Adamski and Bialecki 1981, MEN 1995). With the prospect of almost certain employment on graduating and with comparatively high wages for manual workers, the attraction of these schools is easy to understand. This attraction increased from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s as the wages of higher-educated, non-manual workers declined in both absolute and relative terms, as an indirect consequence of major economic crisis in the country. During this period, previously growing demand for higher education went into reverse, and although enrolments in the post-elementary academic and technical schools remained more or less constant, girls began to constitute the majority of these enrolments – a common sign of decreased prestige and importance as a means of access to economic rewards (Piasek and Vaughan 1987, Szydłowski and Dudziak 1991).

Since 1989, the collapse of much of Poland's state-subsidised heavy industry has led to dramatic changes employment opportunities and, as a consequence, in educational demand. The unemployment that seems inevitably to be a feature of a present-day labour market, but which was largely unknown in communist-era

Poland, has hit the graduates of the basic vocational schools most severely (MEN 1995). While the government were aware of the problem and were considering what to do about vocational education (MEN 1994), the youth of Poland voted with their feet: enrolments in basic vocational schools collapsed from over 50 % of elementary school leavers to around 30 % between 1989 and 1994/95 (figures obtained from CODN, the Central In-service Teacher Training Institution, Warsaw). The students opted instead, in roughly equal proportions, for the alternative post-elementary school routes of academic or technical education. The latter provides an academic education together with higher-skilled, higher technology training, and both routes open up access to higher education. Enrolment in higher education institutions of various types grew rapidly once more, more than doubling between 1989 and 1993, but with the greatest demand now being for places on economics, law and administration, and technical courses. Demand for traditionally popular courses in the arts and humanities, and in medicine and pure sciences, stagnated or even declined (MEN 1995). The new generation of students are anticipating (or at least hoping for) the growth of an economy based on modern technology and the tertiary sector. A more generalist education, perhaps coupled with more advanced technological skills, is seen as the best insurance against unemployment.

An interesting observation in connection with this change in educational aspirations is that the transition to capitalism may prove to be doing more to achieve a goal espoused by the communist leadership that leadership was able to do itself, namely a shift in the nature of the dominant intellectual elite. The Polish cultural intelligentsia has long been afforded a high social status and powerful political position in Poland, largely as a result of the vanguard role they played in cultural and political resistance during two centuries of partition and foreign domination, a role which was fulfilled during the inter-War period of independence. After this intelligentsia had been deliberately during Nazi occupation, the Communist Party strove to build a new socialist intelligentsia which would include a strong technological element, to balance or replace the traditional cultural elite (Gömöri 1973). In this it achieved only limited success (Bialecki and Heyns 1993) but it is possible that now, under the influence of global capitalism, just such a new elite may be rising to a position of power and influence.

There appears to have been recognition at the highest levels of educational administration that the old, fact-laden, didactically delivered curriculum was unlikely to provide the education needed for participation in the anticipated new economy. The narrowness and rigidity of the vocational elements were being rejected and were acknowledged as unsuitable for a labour market about which almost the only thing one could be certain was its uncertainty. It was recognised that "vocational training should now equip the learner with a sizeable body of general knowledge, as this makes it possible for him or her to change jobs" (Janowski 1992: 53). But similar thoughts were also being expressed about the academic or general curriculum. The learning of vast quantities of information would not be an adequate preparation for a world in which available information in any field is growing beyond the capacity of any individual to master and the informational needs of any individual are likely to change rapidly, where flexibility, creativity and problem-solving abilities are likely to be valued more highly than the

ability to memorise facts. This was part of the thinking behind the very early decision of the new government to reduce syllabus contents, as mentioned above, but this was essentially only tinkering with the problem. It did not address the underlying ethos nor the pedagogical traditions of Polish education.

At least two reasons for the delay in initiating more fundamental curriculum change can be suggested. The first is simply that there was a lack of experience in the field. Those in positions to initiate and implement changes had only a vicarious awareness of alternatives to existing forms and practice. This situation was exacerbated by the almost total absence of a relevant Polish educational research base. The majority of universities, for example, did not regard education in general, and curriculum in particular, as legitimate research concerns. This situation remains largely unchanged today. When faced with the need for change it seems likely that those concerned were obliged to seek ideas, materials and inspiration from outside Poland. Janowski (1992), for example, who was Education Deputy Minister after 1989, notes that planned changes in teacher training, away from the inculcation of a 'socialist pedagogy', had to rely on translation of books written in the West. When working in Poland on an examination reform programme during 1994 and 1995, I noted the eagerness with which participating teachers and other educationalists seized on materials from the UK, France, and other European countries. They were keen to find out what had been happening in education elsewhere while they were effectively sealed off from developments, keen to modernise their educational practice to be more in line with the countries with which they now sought closer integration.

And yet, despite the search for exotic models and ideas, there was something else at work which possibly provides a second reason for the delay in getting down to fundamental curriculum reform. This is a widespread belief that current Polish education is essentially of world-class quality: what Janowski (op cit: 53) calls a 'solid education' that equipped 'pupils with solid rudiments of knowledge'. There was clearly a conflict going on here, between a recognition that a knowledge-based education was inadequate for the rapidly changing conditions of modern Poland, and a difficulty in accepting that the removal of large areas of syllabus content for memorisation could leave any 'education' at all. Thus the 'new' Poland seemed to be demanding a redefinition of education itself, and not just modification of content within the old format. Those faced with the need to make decisions had all succeeded in the form of education they feared they might now have to change radically. To accept the inadequacy of such an education would involve an acceptance of their own inadequacy. (And, in particular, might reflect badly on the highest bastions of traditional forms of education, the universities, which are now extremely jealous of the total intellectual and administrative independence that was given to them in one of the first pieces of post-communist legislation.) This same conflict was observed amongst many of the Poles involved in the examination reform programme referred to above. The initial enthusiasm for everything new from other countries often gave way to a defensiveness about the existing Polish system, querying whether there was really any need for significant change after all. Evidence for the quality of Poland education would be given to me in the form of international Maths Olympiad performances, or the exceptionally high International Baccalaureate performance by the only school in Poland entering for this

examination. What was being observed here was the manifestation in the educational sphere of the wider phenomenon mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper. Many Poles are eager to modernise, to catch up with and be seen as part of the West, while at the same time there is a conservative strand that wants to see a return to traditional educational forms. In practice, the curriculum of the communist era was remarkably similar to older, traditional forms, including those of the inter-War independent republic, in its centralised administration, didactic delivery and knowledge-based content. For the traditionalists, the essential changes to be made were the substitution of Christian (i. e. Roman Catholic, in this case) values for the all-pervading communist ideology. Parts of the 1991 Education Act were clearly aimed at doing just this (Pachocinski 1993).

### Major curriculum reform proposals

In the absence of an effective formal curriculum development body, a working party was set up by the Ministry of Education, in 1996, to review the existing general education curriculum and recommend changes to it. This produced a draft document outlining 'Programme Bases of Compulsory Grammar School Subjects' early in 1997 (MEN 1997a). This comprised a general statement of educational aims at all levels of schooling as well as syllabuses for all subjects. I am largely ignorant of the details of the composition and workings of this working party, but the speed with which the draft document was produced supports hearsay suggesting that consultations were selective rather than extensive. The draft represents a starting point for wider consultation, rather than a definitive statement, although the absence of formal channels and mechanisms for "bottom to top" communications has meant that a certain amount of opportunism will figure in these consultations. Those teachers and education workers already involved in curriculum reform projects, such as the KREATOR project to be outlined below, for example, are likely to be used as agents in the wider curriculum reform process simply because they have already been identified, have some – if limited – experience, and can be contacted.

The draft document provides useful insights into the perceptions of intended structures and roles within schools. It is interesting that the presentation of aims and content invariably begins with the phrase "the tasks of schools", reflecting the decentralisation of responsibility and control that forms a major strand in educational reform policy. There is no specification of pedagogy and no specification of what teachers *should* do. Teachers as individuals are, in fact, missing from the document. Responsibility is to be a communal, school affair. This in itself represents a radical change from the present situation in which there is, in general, no departmental structure within schools and each teacher works largely in isolation from her colleagues. Thus, the document exerts pressure towards a structural reorganisation of schools without specifying the form this should take or making such a reorganisation compulsory. This is perhaps a reaction against the previous regime of highly specific regulations, although questions must be raised about the capacity of schools and individuals used to following regulations to manage the implied reorganisation process.

Nor does the document state what pupils *should* know or be able to do at the end of a course – a format now common among "objectives" style curriculum statements. Instead, the school is charged with *enabling* students development in certain areas, and *creating conditions* to achieve certain *competences*. Knowledge is de-emphasised and the "general tasks" of the schools refer to understanding, attitudes, choice of values, individual abilities and interests, imagination and creativity. An emphasis on process rather than product is obvious in the following statement in the general introduction to the document.

A pupil has got the possibility of obtaining competences in the following scopes (MEN 1997a):

- searching, processing and using information,
- planning and estimating own learning,
- solving problems,
- effective communicating,
- activity and cooperation,
- organizing own rest.

This is a convenient point at which to write something about the curriculum development programme in which I have been personally involved. This programme, which carries the acronym KREATOR and is supported by European Union funding, was begun in 1995, thereby predating the curriculum reform working committee. It was the result of a request by the General Education Department of the Ministry of Education for assistance in the creation of a curriculum which would meet the perceived need for a flexible workforce able both to initiate and respond to change. That is, it was set up specifically to help adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the labour market. In that sense it reflects an unprecedented vocationalisation of general education, although of quite a different form to that in the old basic vocational schools. The KREATOR programme aims at the introduction of "pre-vocational skills", rather than specific vocational preparation, and it takes the form of the integration within a range of subjects across the whole school curriculum of five such skills. Within the programme these are more commonly called basic skills or, sometimes, transferable skills, namely:

1. ability to organise, plan and evaluate one's own learning,
2. ability to communicate effectively in a range of contexts,
3. ability to solve untypical problems in a creative way,
4. ability to work effectively with others,
5. ability to use a range of IT skills.

It is easy to see how KREATOR can be accommodated within the new curriculum envisaged by the working party and, in fact, there has been considerable exchange of ideas between the two. This exchange seems likely to continue during the next phase of curriculum development, if only because KREATOR represents one of the few formal curriculum development activities in Poland at the moment. We have the interesting situation that, in the absence of official curriculum development bodies and structures, much of the input to curriculum initiatives will come from

practitioners who have been involved in such programmes. A significant proportion of these are practicing teachers and so, almost by default, a "bottom up" approach to educational innovation is developing, in significant contrast to the older, "top down" system. The dissemination approach in KREATOR is a "horizontal cascade" model, in which selected teachers are inducted into the "mysteries" of core skills integration within their respective subjects and then design and deliver in-service courses for their colleagues in nearby schools. Some kind of hierarchy may develop in the future as a further longer-term aim of the programme is the development of an academic course in curriculum development. Presumably, those who go on to qualify in this course may form the nuclei of curriculum development bodies, but with the commitment of the Ministry of Education to decentralisation of responsibilities to district and school level, it is not at all clear at what level in the system responsibility for curriculum development will lie.

### Conclusions: Poland and the rest of the world

- What is in essence happening in Polish education is a shift away from a mix of general education and a narrow vocational training towards a greater emphasis on general academic education for an increasing proportion of young people. But, somewhat paradoxically, this shift represents a vocationalisation of the general education programme. A general, academic form of curriculum is now seen – both by clients and suppliers – as the best vocational preparation for participation in a post-Fordist economy. The traditional form of academic curriculum, however, is increasingly recognised as unsuited to this new vocationalism and is to be replaced by one emphasising generalisable competences rather than knowledge.

The trends outlined in this paper are by no means unique to Polish education. Rather, they may be seen as particular cases of global patterns and trends. Decentralisation of control, education to meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy, the basic competences curriculum movement, and even the liberal/conservative ideological curriculum tensions have all been noted as more or less global phenomena (e. g. Halsey et al. 1997). In a survey of Western European education systems, an EU-commissioned report identifies the following trends in curriculum emphasis within a range of countries (Institute of Education 1997: 94-101):

- the growing importance of modern languages,
- cross-curricular analysis of real social, environmental and personal problems,
- learning to learn, learning to think, and the acquisition of key skills,
- the growing need for IT provision,
- less prescriptive curriculum definition associated with the competences movement.

The parallels with developments in Poland are obvious, and perhaps understandable given Poland's "westward turs" and the involvement of western European educationalists in a range of projects there. It may be argued that the parallels arise from the logic of the demands of a post-Fordist economy, but it is also clear that the recent history of Poland has left it short of the capacity to



generate purely indigenous responses, and it has borrowed heavily from models available elsewhere. After almost half a century of relative isolation, considerable discontinuity between these models and the Polish system are to be expected.

What is of further interest, and concern, in the Polish context, is whether the system is capable of handling the planned changes, especially at the envisaged speed. (In an address to the KREATOR programme in June 1997, a representative from the Ministry of Education gave a time scale of just two years for the complete introduction of the new curriculum in a decentralised system.) The old Polish educational system was not structured to cope with radical change, and certainly not with change in which the teachers themselves are to be leading agents and innovators. Schools, and individual teachers, will be expected to take on managerial roles, but there is very little experience of this. The system was based on administration rather than management; change, when it occurred, was initiated and detailed at the top, and at each level beneath that the function was one of administration of new regulations. A simple survey among teachers participating in KREATOR revealed that many regard the issuing of new regulations as the only way of bringing about change. Frequent discussions with teachers over the last three years reveal that there is widespread recognition of a need for change, but for many a melioration in their own terms of service and conditions of work are an essential prerequisite to their active involvement in curricular changes that would undoubtedly make demands on them.

The necessary reforms will be more than just structural however; they will be cultural. The new curriculum often demands a redefinition of the nature of the subjects being taught. This in turn demands a redefinition of the teacher's identity and his or her position of authority. KREATOR has thrown up several examples of this, the case of history teaching being particularly interesting. For many of the history teachers involved in the programme the problem with the old history syllabuses was seen as one of Soviet-imposed bias in the facts to be taught. This can now be (and largely has been) rectified and students are free to learn the "correct" historical facts. But the view of the nature of history and of school history has not changed at all. An outline of the proposed new curriculum, for example, defines "historical education" in terms students becoming "acquainted with historical knowledge" and "the use of historical knowledge" (MEN 1997b). The suggestion that a new history syllabus should be less concerned with "facts" and deal more with processes by which such facts are "created" has proved to be anathema to many. Their concept of school history teaching remains the transmission of historical "truths". To suggest that such truths may actually be debatable, or a matter of interpretation, was tantamount to legitimating the old Soviet ideological contamination. Whether liberal or conservative, whether looking forward to a brave new capitalist world or yearning for the re-establishment of Polish tradition, few present-day Polish teachers would not be apprehensive about a curriculum which they felt provided such a legitimization.

The curriculum is not a set of documents; it is a process involving transactions between people. Curriculum reform, therefore, is much more than a matter of changing materials – syllabus documents, books, examinations; much more significantly, it is a matter of changing people. In particular, it is a matter of changing teachers. This is much more difficult to achieve than the re-writing of

syllabuses, but to ignore it is to make the whole reform process more difficult than it needs to be and less likely to succeed, as experience in the UK over the last ten years has illustrated. A key point about the KREATOR programme is that it recognises the centrality of teacher involvement and participation, but it is only a small scale intervention compared with the aspirations of the Polish Ministry of Education's curriculum reform plans. As suggested above, close involvement of teachers in future curriculum reform may turn out to be a consequence of a lack of experience elsewhere, but this involvement must receive support. New conditions demand new curricula, but they also make new demands on teachers. (See, for example, Wojciechowska 1995 on the demands on mathematics teachers.) They must be both willing and able to meet these new demands. Issues such as teacher's terms of service, professional support, pre-service and in-service training, and the strengthening of subject-based teacher associations will all need to be addressed as part of a successful attempt at curriculum renewal. A radically new curriculum cannot flourish in a structure designed to support something quite different.

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