

EDUCATIONAL POLITICS AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION – THE POLISH PERSPECTIVE¹

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***Abstract:** Intercultural education is undertaken and implemented in the conditions abundant with contradictions. On one hand – in democratic states the official politics and legal regulations enhance multi- and intercultural education. On the other – the practice reveals not only the diversified needs of different ethnic, religious and national groups but also the issue of the hidden activity programme. Conflicting interests of various groups of significance in particular countries, the fearful attitudes to the Other, stereotypes and prejudices deeply rooted in social opinions are just some of the threats which hinder the promotion of the model of intercultural education. However, due to social transformations, this is the area which should be taken into account in educational policies. Politics itself is defined as an art of controlling and negotiating the interests of various social groups but is also treated as a kind of strategic game, of which the foundation is winning and losing. What seems of special rank is the awareness that no political system, even perfectly democratic, can provide all people with everything. Political activities always favour some at the cost of others. This largely derives from the fact that one of the essential, constitutive elements of politics is its axiological dimension, associated with creating particular ideas, ideologies and political doctrines. They organize the view of the world from a certain perspective, indicating the way of acting – the applied principles, norms or methods – of the people who implement them. Therefore, educational politics is also based on appropriate knowledge of the art of implementing what is possible among the postulates expressing the interests of different social groups. This gains significance in the culturally diversified environment, where educational politics should be especially focused on.*

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Unfortunately, educational politics in Poland is one of the most neglected/abandoned fields of education. Obviously, this results from excessive influence of politics on the educational sphere in the period of communist Poland.

Keywords: politics, educational politics, multi- and intercultural education, culturally diversified environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural education is undertaken and implemented in the conditions abundant in contradictions. On one hand – in democratic countries the official politics and legal regulations foster multi- and intercultural education. However, on the other hand – practice indicates quite differentiated needs of various ethnic, religious or national groups (Lewowicki 2005: 21, Kelley 2010) and the appearing issue of the hidden programme. Conflicting interests of various significant groups in particular countries, attitudes of fear towards the Other, stereotypes rooted in social opinions, and prejudices are just some of the threats which hinder promoting the model of intercultural education. Yet, due to social changes, this is a field which should be taken into account in educational politics. Unfortunately, educational policy in Poland is one of the most neglected/abandoned areas of education. This must be an effect of excessive influence of politics on the educational sphere in the times of communist Poland¹. Although the recent years have been full of suggestions for educational changes in a more narrow or broader scale, they cannot be treated as a transparent educational policy. These are rather urgent activities introduced without social consultations. Despite the fact that these activities have become a part of election programmes, their essential value is difficult to assess. They constitute a set of populist slogans rather than the actual description of suggested activities planned by a particular political party in the field of education. Still, educational politics is an area which requires special interest – particularly in the context of functioning of education in the more and more diversified world. It is not possible to implement efficient educational policy without a well-prepared system of diagnoses and prognoses which will allow for realistic/optimal planning of educational changes. It is expected that due to the necessity to consider the postulates of various social groups in the educational policy, its main constituents are strategy and tactics. The analysis of educational politics in multicultural environments may create an impression that other activities are dealt with – compromise and struggle (1989).

The presented text is an attempt at indicating the determinants of practising educational politics in culturally diversified environments. These issues have been explored in the publishing series *Edukacja Międzykulturowa / Intercultural Education*. As a separate thread, educational politics has been discussed by many authors. In 2005, a publication entirely dedicated to these issues was prepared (Lewowicki, Ogrodzka-Mazur 2005). However, educational politics most frequently appear as a secondary motif touched by authors merely on the margin of basic discussion (Gajdzica 2011, Ogrodzka-Mazur 2014, 2015).

2. DETERMINANTS OF PRACTISING EDUCATIONAL POLITICS

Functioning of education in culturally diversified environments results in specific situations in all areas which determine its development. Which minority group is taken into account is also a significant factor. There are three sources of the birth and development of national minorities: migrations, the annexation of foreign territories and change of state borders (Grzybowski 2008: 68-81). The presence of minority groups forces the state to formulate a policy towards them. Its nature depends on two major issues – whether the presence of the minority is accepted in a particular society and whether a due part of the society's resources is justly allotted to minority groups (Rabczuk 2006: 144).

In order to examine how the issues of educational politics have been described by the authors exploring them in the publishing series *Edukacja Międzykulturowa /Intercultural Education/*, some factors have been applied in this study which are associated with state politics (political system) as well as demographic, sociocultural and economic determinants.

2.1 State politics (political system) and the activities undertaken in multicultural environments

Political determinants agree with political and ideological interests of education. They influence directly the contents and form of the educational policy. The type of authority in a particular country, the earlier mentioned election programmes of political parties as well as their quality and character determine the introduced changes, core curricula, educational network, and the autonomy (or its lack) of head-teachers and teachers in their work at school. The focus on education results from the wish to shape social awareness, views and beliefs. Totalitarian, conservative and autocratic politics necessitates the hierarchical nature of the educational system – because it should reflect the implemented educational policy. Such a system of education involves control over the teacher's work, indicates compulsory curricula at each educational stage, and – in compliance with the applied direction – more precisely indicates the axiological and teleological assumptions. The educational network, its patency and teaching profiles are also supervised. This as well concerns the nature of the implemented educational policy towards minorities and immigrants.

The state's undertakings are reflected in the educational law – a part of the administration law system, which comprises legal acts regulating the state activity in the field of the educational system, teaching and moral education, and the legal relations appearing in this sphere. Educational law specifies the state's tasks in education and the system of education is responsible for their implementation. The way in which national or cultural minorities build their social capital is also associated with the implemented educational policy – particularly at the state level (Gajdzica 2010: 188-199, Gajdzica 2015: 95-105).

The policy aiming at support for the majority and building a strong mono-cultural

state makes the representatives of minorities choose one of the following:

Active opposition – the capital is a manifestation of rebellion taking place along with some repressions caused by political reactions. As a result, the conducted actions have the nature of fight or active resistance. Associations and organizations act in conspiracy and are based on a hidden programme. Social bonds are strong and emotionally tinted. What occurs in this case is minority education aiming at survival and maintaining the identity – yet, this is marked with rebellion, resistance and willingness to change through fight-oriented activities. The contents and values passed down the generations constitute the basis for shaping attitudes of the young – the attitudes involving aggression and prejudice towards the majority. The educational policy of the minority stands in opposition to the one officially implemented by the state.

A passive attitude – subordination to the majority. As a result, there are no undertakings heading for promotion of the own culture or tradition. In such a situation, the educational policy of the minority does not exist. Neither do the activities which aim at taking into account (in general curricula and educational policy undertakings) the key issues for minority groups. This might also result from dispersion of the minority, its inner conflicts or weak social bonds. Lack of educational policy results in gradual assimilation.

Opposition which poses passiveness – building the social capital in secrecy, as a bridgehead and from the fear of repressions. Activities are undertaken in a narrow range and are based on mutual trust and loyalty within a small group of people. The mechanisms of building the educational policy are similar to the first type – education is treated by the minority as a sphere which enables maintaining the identity and preservation of tradition. The social bonds are strong and emotional. The minority education heads for survival and maintaining the identity but there are no acts promoting aggression and rebellion against the majority. The priority is surviving.

Discussing currently implemented types of educational policies towards minorities may lead to noticing that they can be placed on an axis from official support (but with the hidden programme of the state) to optimal actions, which constitute the foundations of the educational system which promotes intercultural education. They can be briefly described as three types of activities:

- Official political support – aiming to obscure hidden actions (a cover for acts of repression in a different area). Activities promoting a particular minority are treated instrumentally in order to achieve particular political objectives. The minority, which in this situation has good conditions for building the social capital, is under control and feels to be in opposition to other social groups. This influences the educational policy of both the majority and the minority. Willingness to show a democratic face means that double activity of the majority takes place – the official and hidden programme. The contents convenient for the state are endorsed, promoted and financially supported. What is established are

showcase schools and associations which are of decorative nature. The activities conducted by the minority group are supervised and subjected to censorship. Officially, the minority is not repressed but, in the situation of lack of subordination, it loses its privileged rank and financial source.

- Passive political acceptance by the state without (e.g. financial) support. As an effect, activities are conducted in compliance with the own resources. This allows the minority to implement their own open educational policy. The state does not interfere in the undertaken activities, neither hinders nor limits them. Therefore, it is possible to run a system of teaching, training and conducting organizations which promote culture. What constitutes a difficulty is the lack of financial support – when the financial measures are limited and the minority does not feel that education is indispensable for maintaining the identity, educational activities can sometimes be abandoned. Implementation of the educational policy is independent from the state politics and its quality and range is a derivative of the social capital of the minority.
- Political support – as one of the pillars of the state's programme – financial and programme support, taking into account the needs of the minority in the broader programme of social activities. What can be noticed also in this area are many ways of conducting the educational policy by the state – from activities aiming at gradual assimilation to the optimal, widely promoted intercultural education. Educational policy implemented by the minority has the open character and its quality and range depends on the awareness of the significance of educational activities and the social capital of minority groups.

It is worth due attention that educational liberalism might also lead to negative effects – for instance, to perpetuation of the mechanism of social reproduction or of social stratification (Lewowicki 2000: 25). Thus, it is essential to specify the teleological assumptions in a precise way. The educational policy heading for interculturalism should aim at:

- learning and understanding the own self, the culture of the own region – in order to be aware of oneself as well as of the possessed values and cultural heritage;
- overcoming the tendency to limit oneself only to staying within the own values, the native world, in favour of opening to Others and understanding them – respect for differences and treating them as an enriching developmental factor;
- implementation of noticing and familiarizing with the Other, shaping sensitivity and ability to cooperate, counteracting the creation of simplified schemes of the Other based on stereotypes and limited knowledge (Nikitorowicz 2002: 50-51).

2.2 Economic factors and implementation of educational policy

Economic determinants of educational politics reflect both the economic condition of a particular state and the rank attributed by politicians to educational sectors. The

awareness of how significant the education system is for the development of the state makes some countries allot much larger budget to educational development than in other states with a comparable or higher gross domestic product. It is also important how the received financial resources are spent – whether they just fulfil the current needs associated with maintaining the existing system or whether some planned investments are undertaken – both in material and human resources (e.g. staff training system). Another major issue is the relation of education to the economic sector through activities which concern designing vocational and higher education.

The significance of economic factors was confirmed in the research results of the studies conducted in the county of Cieszyn (Gajdzica, 2005). In four out of twelve schools run by local authorities, educational policy was limited to specifying the conditions of educational activity. This means that the county authorities focus on the maintenance and development of the school material base. Only in two cases, the view on educational policy reached beyond the economic area¹. The information obtained in particular county schools suggests that economic issues – often emphasized as the most important factor in organization of education – become the only element comprised in the assumptions of educational politics. It is interesting that the financial condition of the municipality does not matter. What becomes a characteristic feature is the care only for ensuring the functioning of school. Educational issues are often on the margin of municipal activity – treated as a financial burden. There is hardly any planning.

Economic factors become a determinant especially in the case of bad financial condition of administration units responsible for running the educational network. Such a situation took place when municipalities were obliged to fulfil obligatory kindergarten preparation for six year old children without any additional subvention. This resulted in closing down many kindergartens, especially in rural areas, and in decreased indices of popularization of kindergarten education (Grabowska 2005: 87). A slightly different dimension of economic dependency of school education is presented by Irena Bogacz (1996), who explores the issues of minority education in Zaolzie in the historical aspect. The author writes about economic pressure which became the heaviest blow for school education in Zaolzie at the beginning of the 20th century. In the interwar period, enrolling a Polish child to the Czech school was frequently the only way to protect from unemployment (p. 43).

2.3. Sociocultural and demographic factors

The way of conducting educational policy is directly associated with **social determinants**. The less autocratic way of implementing the policy in a particular country, the more possibilities of considering social needs (including those of local nature) in the process of educational transformations. What is possible in the democratic state are bottom-up changes, which take into account the specificity of the social environment, demographic changes, and the needs concerning particular jobs, hence also vocational education. The recent years brought about an

informational explosion, which resulted in the increased demand for new professions and jobs. This is also situated among socially significant factors which educational policy should consider. What can exemplify this are social campaigns and the diagnosed problems concerning the general health condition of citizens (Piechaczek-Ogierman 2009).

It is the issue of **historical-national determinants** – strictly related to the specificity of the state, local environment, its history and culture – which is also of due significance, especially in the context of implementing the policy towards minority groups. This is associated with the citizens' general awareness of their own identity as well as with their attitude to changes. It affects the opinions and functioning stereotypes – e.g. concerning minorities.

Radical politics is linked with promoting the idea of a strong state and nation. School is treated as a tool for shaping the attitudes and the hierarchy of values which agree with the promoted model of education and the aim of building a uniform view of the world (Paszko 2000: 307). Past experiences are of a lot of significance here. Presenting the situation of Poles in the period of partitions, Lewowicki (2000) describes the issues of implementation of the educational policy aiming at assimilation of the Polish population, and in the case of territories annexed by Prussia – at maintaining and promoting the German national spirit (pp. 24-25). Less determined actions aiming at assimilation of the Polish population were carried out in the territories under the Austro-Hungarian rule. The author defines them as an alleviated form of subordinating the societies or communities deprived of freedom/independence. This consisted in small gestures liberating the educational regulations and allowing for references to the elements of national cultures (Lewowicki 2002: 18). The tragic experiences of the partitions substantially influenced the attitude to national minorities and their cultures after World War I in the reborn Polish state, in which there were some opportunities of learning in national languages but, on the other hand, unwillingness was often manifested and numerous restrictions were introduced (Lewowicki 2013). The further experiences – associated with World War II and later with having the externally controlled government – caused that it possible to notice a more favourable attitude to national, ethnic and regional cultures only in the seventies. Although the notion of multiculturalism, used in West-European countries, did not function in the official language, the conducted activities were of multicultural nature. The tendencies to build multicultural education (fulfilling the needs and ambitions of national and ethnic minorities) became much more intensive after the political transformation in 1989 (Lewowicki 2014: 24-26).

Historical-national conditions frequently determine the character of the minority school and the way in which it is perceived in the local environment. Dariusz Wojakowski (2000) draws attention to the stereotype of an Ukrainian which is maintained in the South-East of Poland. The implemented educational policy aims at education into tolerance and familiarization of the youth from the dominant group

with the minority culture, which contributes to the change in the attitudes of the young (p. 126).

Lack of discussion on the common past might often perpetuate stereotypes and lead to abandoning discussion in other fields. This can be exemplified by the attitude of the Lithuanian majority to the Polish and Russian minority. The historical-national determinants become the foundation of the excluding educational policy which blocks the development of the minority (Kurzępa 2002: 181-194). A similarly difficult situation can be observed in the case of the Polish minority in Belarus, where historical factors – concerning both the distant times (I and II Republic of Poland) and the whole 20th century (Sobecki 2005: 253), affect educational politics and determine the quality and character of minority schools and their work.

Observing the demographic prognoses and changes in culturally and ethnically diversified environments allows for indicating certain tendencies which enable planning social or educational activities. The analysis of demographic conditions is mostly associated with predicting birthrate increases and declines which determine the development of the educational network. These factors are directly related to other fields, e.g. economic determinants. In the case of minority schools, demographic changes most frequently result in closing schools down, especially if in particular countries there are trends to open huge school “giants”. This takes place in the Czech Republic and occurred earlier in Czechoslovakia. The tendency described by Janina Urban (1994, 2000) to close down small schools in Zaolzie – as unprofitable and unnecessary due to the decreasing number of learners – has maintained till today (1994: 116, 2000: 55-59).

3. CONCLUSION

Politics is a notion which has functioned unceasingly in scientific discussion since ancient times. The Aristotelian expression “the man – a political animal” (2006) indicates that the man, who by nature is a social creature, is also oriented towards life in the community which is politically organized. Politics itself is described as the art of controlling and negotiating the interests of various social groups (Wnuk-Lipiński 2000: 135) and, at the same time, it is treated as a kind of strategic game based on winning and losing. What seems important is the awareness that no political system, even a perfectly democratic one, provides everybody with everything. Political activities always favour some at the cost of others (Buttolph Johanson, Reynolds, Mycoff 2010: 18). To a large extent, this results from the fact that the axiological dimension is a constitutive element of politics. It is associated with promoting certain ideas, ideologies and political doctrines which organize the view of the world from a particular perspective and indicate the way of acting – the applied principles, norms or the methods used by people who implement them in life. This often becomes a source of conflicts which might result either from the protection of self-esteem (both on the individual and group level) or from ideological differences – the latter is a consequence of building the individual or

group identity in the system of the own beliefs and convictions (Wosińska 2004: 502). Thus, educational politics as well is based on appropriate knowledge of implementation of what is possible among all the postulates presenting the interests of different social groups. This gains in significance in the culturally diversified environment – therefore, especially there educational politics should be paid special attention.

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