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The Current Situation of Education and Continuing Professional Development of RE Teachers in Poland in the Context of the Social Challenges

Abstract

The author of this article presents Religious Education teachers continuing professional development in Poland in the context of political, social, economic, cultural and educational changes. During the last years, Poland has developed a national strategy for teacher training and introduced many new regulations. The aim of the new legal solutions is to prepare RE teachers as will be competent specialists in theology, accomplished in didactics and pedagogy and capable of caring for – and contributing to – the upbringing of pupils of varying needs; as well as organizers of social activities in class and school, also in effective cooperation with the local parish. Despite the many changes, RE teachers still have very difficult situation in Poland and face many challenges.

Keywords

Religious Education, teachers, continuing professional development, Poland

As an university lecturer, but also a consultant for RE teachers at the In-service Teacher Training Centre, I would like to look at the issue more from the perspective of RE teachers rather than as the expert of Catechetics and Religious Education. This article is divided into four parts. In the first part, the social, political, economic and educational context in Poland of the past decades is presented. In the second section will draw attention to the development of Religious Education and social cohesion, while third section will explain the

Polish legal situation as regards RE teacher training. The fourth and final section will describe the three stages of the RE teachers training in Poland and will then examine the challenges facing the Religious Education in Poland¹.

1. Polish society in transition

At first, the economic and political transition from the socialist type of society to the capitalist society seemed not too complicated, yet now, the transition is perceived by Poles as highly problematic. The financial, political, ideological, psychological, sociological and existential, transition is experienced as a far more complex process. The present challenges facing Catholics in Poland in a democratic society, in some ways are more demanding than those in a socialist one². Poles are now living in a time of transition, where, in one sense, the old, socialist system is still influential and the neo-liberal one rapidly changing the life style, the values and the daily praxis of Poles. Both systems seem to co-exist, although, in many ways, they are contradictory. In the time of transition people feel uncertain as the balance of the previous situation is disturbed. There is a big crises of adaptation to the new situation. At the same time, Poles experience in their everyday life the huge mistakes or negligence of the government in all possible dimensions of social life. This makes them feel very fragile and insecure³. The typical Pole fears what the future is going to bring to them. This is more so for RE teachers since many schools are being closed, and since there is proposal of funding of Religious Education from the budget of local government, which may mean reducing the number of hours of RE lessons.

¹ This article is an extended version of a speech given by the author in Madrid during the XV Conference of European Forum on Religious Education: The Teaching of Religion and Social Cohesion in Europe. Proposals for the Training of Teachers in April 2012.

² See J. Mariański, *The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Civil Society: Contradiction or Complementarity?*, "Religious Studies and Theology" 27 (2008) 1, p. 21-42; J. Kłoczowski, *A History of Polish Christianity*, Cambridge 2000, Cambridge University Press.

³ See H. Lombaerts & E. Osewska, *Historical and Geo-Political Reality of a United Europe*, in: S. Gatt, H. Lombaerts, E. Osewska, A. Scerri, *Catholic Education, European and Maltese Perspectives. Church School's response to future challenges*, Floriana 2004, Secretariat for Catholic Education, p. 27-43; A. Potocki, *Wychowanie religijne w polskich przemianach*, Warszawa 2007, UKSW; J. Bagrowicz, *Edukacja religijna współczesnej młodzieży. Źródła i cele*, Toruń 2000, UMK.

2. Religious education and social cohesion

In this context it is very important to question what type of relationship between religion/faith and society is most desirable. The relationship is neither static nor one sided. It is indeed a complex, dynamic as well as mutual. Among other things, the relationship concerns the connections between religion and a sense of identity; religion and a sense of belonging to society; religion and a sense of life. Such a relationship can be conformist in nature, and/or dynamic with religion being socially critical⁴. For about two decades, in Poland, the Government and Church were willing to work together. However, presently, in the situation of financial crisis (globalisation, consumerism, internationalisation of the labour market, migration) the liberal government is in many ways trying to move religion into the margin of the public life and minimize the influence of the Church. Yet at the same time there is a need for religion to be socially critical and progressive in providing a moral standards. The changing relationships between Church and State challenges the status quo and what was previously taken for granted, especially with regards to the social position of religion in the Polish society⁵. This is not to be seen only as a negative evolution. On the contrary: the clarification of the mutual recognition creates new opportunities. In modern society, the Church may offer a new space to contribute to the well being of society, and to introduce a qualitative difference of being a human person⁶.

RE in Poland still combines knowledge and formation into Christianity or even into Roman Catholic Church, so the primary aim is still catechetical⁷. This makes one ask whether the values, criteria, norms presented during RE lessons

⁴ See E. Osewska, J. Stala, *W kierunku katechezy rodzinnej*, Kielce 2003, *Jedność; Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, UKSW; *Rodzina bezcenny dar i zadanie*, ed. J. Stala, E. Osewska, Radom 2006, Polwen; J. Stala, *Familienkatechese in Polen um die Jahrhundertwende. Probleme und Herausforderungen*, Tarnów 2008, Biblos; J. Stala, *W kierunku integralnej edukacji religijnej w rodzinie*, Tarnów 2010, Polihymnia; J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009, Polihymnia.

⁵ See J. Mariański, *The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Civil sSociety: Contradiction or Complementarity?*, "Religious Studies and Theology" 27 (2008) Nr 1, p. 21-42; J. Mariański, *Religijność społeczeństwa polskiego w perspektywie europejskiej. Próba syntezy socjologicznej*, Kraków 2004, Nomos.

⁶ See H. Lombaerts, *The Impact of the Status of Religion in Contemporary Society upon Interreligious Learning*, in: *Interreligious Learning*, ed. D. Pollefeyet, Leuven 2007, Leuven University Press, p. 55-86.

⁷ See Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Dyrektorium katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, Kraków 2001, WAM; Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Podstawa programowa Kościoła*

help pupils to find themselves in the new social reality. One has to be reminded that RE does not have the biggest impact on society and the behaviours of its members. The role of home, local community and communities to which young people belong⁸, the role of media are indeed vital and more powerful forces in shaping a sense of identity and a social cohesion.

Nonetheless, RE should prepare pupils to understand the changing influence of religion on societies and events in the society. In this context, increasing the quality of RE is now of fundamental importance⁹. RE has to help pupils to think critically and to discover truth, which is, many a time, manipulated by media. RE should also support the humanization of the social life. This implies that RE has to create in the classroom the space for asking questions, expressing doubts and confronting many arguments. Are the teachers ready to undertake the critical role of the religion and build social cohesion in RE education?

3. Presuppositions of RE teachers training

The 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century have been a period of far-reaching educational reform in Poland. RE teachers together with all school staff experienced new reform in a very short period. The emphasis on the role of academic training has been linked with that of training in pedagogy, didactics and ICT. A key issue where the quality of a teacher's work is concerned is regular

katolickiego w Polsce, Kraków 2001, WAM; Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, Program nauczania religii, Kraków 2001, WAM.

⁸ See H. Lombaerts, E. Osewska, *The Modern Christian Family as a First Setting for Religious and Moral Education?*, in: *Religious Education/Catechesis in the Family: A European Perspective*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, UKSW, p. 11-25; J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Sociological Aspects of Family Religious Education in Poland*, in: *Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010, UKSW, p. 167-177.

⁹ See P. Duksa, *Using Survey Technique in Diagnosing Behavior Issues of a School*, in: A. Bielinowicz (ed), *Improvement of Pupils Disciplining Skills*, Olsztyn 2011, SQL S.C., p. 27-37; H. Lombaerts, *The Management and Leadership of a Christian Schools*, Groot Bijgaarden 1998, Vlaams Lasalliaans Perspectief; E. Osewska, *Die Aktivierung des Schülers im Religionsunterricht an der Grundschule - dargestellt am Beispiel der Schulbuchreihe 'Das Geschenk Jesu'*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 71 (2011) 1, p. 123-133; E. Osewska, *Die katholischen Schulen im Kontext der sozialen, kulturellen und religiösen Situation in Europa*, "Theologica" 46 (2011) 2, p. 335-348; J. Stala, *Ausgewählte Aspekte von Erziehung und Bildung an der katholischen Schule*, "Angelicum" 88 (2011), p. 751-761; J. Stala, *Lehrpläne und Schulbücher für den Religionsunterricht an den Staatlichen Grundschulen in Polen*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 70 (2010) 3, p. 405-414; J. Stala, *Discovering God with Children the Help of R.E. Books in a Polish Context*, in: F. Kraft, H. Roose, G. Büttner (eds.), *Symmetrical communication? Philosophy and Theology in Classrooms across Europe*, Rehbürg-Loccum 2011, RPI, p. 49-59.

professional development. There are more and more requirements for teachers but their professional status is lower and lower. In fact, the Polish state of affairs in education is very much dependent on the results of the country's political and economic transformation. Almost every government introduces new education system. Simultaneously, the educational needs of young people are growing rapidly¹⁰.

The Polish legal situation as regards RE teacher training is rather a complex one. Provisions are to be found in general instruments like the Education System Act 1991 (with subsequent amendments), the Act of 8 January 1999 on the Implementation of the Education System Reform (with further amendments), the Act of 26 January 1982 – Teachers' Charter (with further amendments¹¹ and in documents connected with the Church functioning and in Regulations between the Ministry of Education and the Episcopate. The Concordat contains a guarantee that all State schools and kindergartens will provide, whenever there is a demand, Religious Education¹². At the same time, however, the RE programmes, including any textbooks to be used in RE classes, are to be determined solely by the Church authorities. Moreover, the RE teachers have to be appointed by the Church on the basis of their professional qualifications and the granting of a canonical mission. Article 53 of the Constitution guarantees to everyone the freedom of conscience and religious beliefs, and allows religious education in schools, providing that it does not 'violate the freedom of conscience and religious beliefs of others'.

During the last years, Poland has developed a national strategy for teacher training and introduced many new regulations. The aim of the new legal solutions is to prepare RE teachers as competent specialists in theology, accomplished in didactics and pedagogy and capable of caring for - and contributing to – the

¹⁰ See R. Pachociński, *Współczesne systemy edukacyjne*, Warszawa 2000; P. Tomasiak, *Religia w dialogu z edukacją*, Warszawa 2004, Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie; K. Misiaszek, *Koncepcja nauczania religii w publicznej szkole polskiej*, Warszawa 2010, Towarzystwo Naukowe Franciszka Salezego.

¹¹ See Polish EURYDICE Unit in consultation with the experts from the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and Refernet (Co - operation Fund Foundation), *The System of Education in Poland*, Warszawa 2008, p. 6.

¹² In 17 July 1989 after the fall of socialist system, Poland renewed diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Then a negotiating about Concordat started and an agreement was signed by the Polish government on 28 July 1993. The document became the subject of strong political debates. Few years later, ratifying the Concordat became a top priority for the AWS leaders as the strong Church supporters. On 8 January 1998, with 273 votes supporting the motion and 161 opposing it, the Sejm (lower chamber of Parliament) accepted the 1993 Concordat. The Senate gave its support to the agreement on 22 January 1998, which was then signed by President. Once implemented, the Concordat substantially has redefined Church-state relations in Poland.

upbringing of pupils of different needs, as well as organizers of social activities in class and school in collaboration with the local parish.

The aim, content and meaning of RE in Poland have been explicitly formulated in line with Church documents. The aim is still catechetical, and RE in schools is as a part of catechesis. Thus the young generation are supposedly being prepared to profess and live their faith. In Poland, RE is a confessional course, offered by the Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant denominations within the curriculum of state schools¹³. This model is based on presupposition of continuous religious socialization. Children learn to reflect on the faith that they received in the family and the parish. It is evident that within this model of RE a specific claim is made to the quality of the RE teacher, who is planning and organizing the didactical and pedagogical process. The RE teacher is expected to be competent to present the correct Church doctrine, have the teaching and pedagogical skills and additionally to be a witness to Christian faith. But it seems that the Roman Catholic Church in Poland need to recognize the new situation, namely the growing individualization, religious and cultural pluralism, consumerism, as well as social marginalization¹⁴.

School and RE lessons may be understood as a service to young people to critically evaluate the position of religion in the society. However, the bishops in Poland have high expectancies from RE teachers. They expect more orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but not as much specifically high quality, professionalization and flexibility of quick reaction towards the new circumstances. The crucial questions are: what kind of qualification and formation are needed for the RE teachers in this context? How to combine the theory of theology given at the universities and the praxis of RE teaching at schools? What to do, in order to prevent the collision of graduates of theology with the reality when they start the first job?

¹³ More about the RE in Catholic Schools in Poland: E. Osewska, J. Stala, *Catholic School. Polish perspective*, "Rivista lasalliana" (2008) 2, p. 241-246; E. Osewska, *To Educate in a Diversified Europe*, "The Person and the Challenges" 1 (2011) Nr 1, p. 71-88; E. Osewska, *Erwartungen an die katholische Schule in einem postmodernen Zeitalter*, "The Person and the Challenges" 1 (2011) Nr 2, p. 95-108; E. Osewska, *Die katholischen Schulen im Kontext der sozialen, kulturellen und religiösen Situation in Europa*, "Theologica" 46 (2011) 2, p. 335-348.

¹⁴ See K. Misiaszek, *Koncepcja nauczania religii w publicznej szkole polskiej*, Warszawa 2010, Towarzystwo Naukowe Franciszka Salezego; P. Tomasiak, *Nauczanie religii w publicznym liceum ogólnokształcącym wobec założeń programowych polskiej szkoły*, Warszawa 2001, Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie.

4. Challenges for Teachers Training and Continuing Professional Development

RE teachers training in Poland is organized in 3 stages similar to that of the teacher of any subject,¹⁵ that is:

1. *Initial teacher training/education.* 5 years of unified studies (with the pedagogical and catechetical preparation) leading to a Master's degree.
2. *Induction.* The process of providing training and support during the first few years of teaching or the first year in a particular school. The school of the new RE teacher is in charge of providing induction. In Poland the amended Teachers' Charter, adopted on the 18th of February 2000, has introduced four categories in the teaching career: *trainee teacher*; *contract teacher*; *appointed teacher* and *chartered teacher*. The first two stages are strongly connected with the induction process. Trainee and contract teachers have the status of contractual employees; appointed and chartered teachers enjoy the status of career civil servants. Chartered teachers with an outstanding record may also be awarded the title of honorary school education professor.
3. *Teacher development or continuous professional development.* In Poland this is optional, but it is clearly linked to career advancement and salary increases. According to teacher training standards, RE teachers should undergo continuous professional development, which is organised by Regional In-Service Teacher Training Centres in co-operation with Catechetical Departments.

The new legal regulations create the kind of motivational mechanism that would encourage teachers to "invest in themselves", through the raising of qualifications, supplementation of knowledge and augmentation of skills, with the more experienced supporting young teachers just starting out in their professional life¹⁶.

RE teachers, today, experience the tension of the re-organization of education system and burden of administrative work. They had experienced enthusiasm when Poland was opening up to the European perspective. However, now they

¹⁵ M. Grondas, *Rozwój zawodowy nauczyciela. Materiały edukacyjne – Szkolenie Ekspertów ds. Awansu zawodowego Nauczycieli*, Warszawa 2004, WODN; J. Pielachowski, *Rozwój i awans zawodowy nauczyciela*. Poznań 2001, EMPI.

¹⁶ The Regulation of the Minister for National Education and Sport of September 22nd 2004 on Standards in Teacher Training (Official Journal of Laws, No. 207, item 2110); The Regulation of the Minister for National Education and Sport of April 18th 2002 on the determining of teaching standards for particular subjects of study and levels of training (Official Journal of Laws, No. 116 of 2002, item 1004, amendments: Dz. U. No. 144 of 2002, item 1401, Dz. U. No. 210 of 2003, item 2040, Dz. U. No. 194 of 2004, item 1985).

face the challenge of having to take into account the education policies of every new government in Poland. Although the Church in Poland has full responsibility for the aims and content of RE teaching. This very often means that only the heads of Catechetical Departments and RE theorists create the Core Curriculum or Programmes and RE textbooks, and even the decision of choosing the RE textbook is left to the bishop. In my opinion, RE teachers should have their say in the planning of RE education; as regards the not only the practical matters, but also in creating the basis of RE teaching.

RE teachers have very difficult situation in Poland. From the school perspective, they are still seen as category “B”. They have the same right according to the Teachers Chart, but often their rights are not respected. From the Church perspective, the lay RE teachers are also second category, because the expectations from them are much higher than from the priests. When there is any conflict at school they, in many cases, can not count on the support of the institutional Church. So, social cohesion should start with the equality of RE teachers and the respect of the Catholic Social Teaching. Consequently, religious formation of RE teachers requires a pedagogy that is adapted to the concrete situation of the life of persons and groups, and which respects their needs.

It seems that RE teaching in the state schools in Poland stress too much ecclesial formation and not enough on the development of personal and religious maturity. This leads to the following challenges:

- increasing the opportunities for the personal and religious development of RE teachers;
- access to good quality teachers professional development;
- recognition and transparency of teachers qualifications;
- incorporation of ICT into RE teaching;
- training of specific social skills;
- developing critical thinking skills;
- responsible preparation of RE teachers for today’s challenges;
- strengthen cooperation between RE teachers and teachers of other subjects;
- foster inter-cultural understanding;
- support of mutual European understanding: people from Western countries hardly can imagine what happened to people who belonged to the socialist regime; people from Central and Eastern Europe hardly can understand the real nature and the impact of the secularisation process and the shift into the capitalist society;
- integration of live visions and religion in a secularised context;
- looking for a new type of interaction of religion and society;
- shaping the ethical dimension of democracy;

- exploring new models of collaboration with the family, which help to avoid the isolation of children due to parents' labor migration;
- prevention of social exclusion of pupils coming from poor families;
- growing sensitivity to the needs of the elderly and the sick;
- restoring the dignity of the human person.

RE teachers do not come “ready made”, so they need training and professional development. Especially now, in the context of the rapid socio-political changes, they require good quality continuous professional development. I hope that RE teachers in Poland will receive the proper assistance in the acquisition of adequate educational competence. Let it be in time!

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