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MORE THAN EDUCATION — FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION AS A TOOL TO SOLVE CHILDREN AND YOUTH PROBLEMS¹

Abstract

Education (formal, non-formal and informal initiatives) as a social practice is often used to solve social problems on macro, mezzo and micro level. To analyze how educational system is treated as a tool of social change it is important to answer how those problems are defined, ranked, who is responsible for specifying those problems and finally who implements solutions and evaluates their impact.

To find answers to the questions above I will focus on the analysis of the 1999 educational reform's results. The reform aimed at equalizing opportunities (school as a main institutional actor in the area of equalizing opportunities). Moreover, I will analyze visible consequences and results of various actions taken by central and local government's institutions, schools, NGOs and community programs. It is worth to look at relations between these actors, to try to reconstruct logics, consequences and results of actions and initiatives for children and young people.

The text is based on nationwide and local researches concerning educational problems (diagnostic and evaluation studies) and my own researches (e.g. final evaluation of Youth Program 2000–2006).

Abstrakt

Edukacja (zarówno formalna, jak i pozaformalna i nieformalna) jest praktyką społeczną stawiającą sobie za cel rozwiązywanie konkretnych problemów społecznych zarówno na poziomie makro, mezzo i mikro. Ważna wydaje się odpowiedź na pytanie, kto, w jaki sposób definiuje te problemy, jak są hierarchizowane, kto (jaki podmioty) są odpowiedzialne za implementację rozwiązań i wreszcie, kto i w jaki sposób ocenia efekty tych działań.

Jeden z zasadniczych celów, jaki stawia sobie szkoła oraz organizacje pozarządowe pracujące z dziećmi i młodzieżą, jest wyrównywanie szans edukacyjnych (temu celowi miała służyć

¹ Author's note: This article is partly based on the result of final evaluation of the "Youth" Program in Poland (run by M. Jewdokimow, T. Kasprzak, P. Sadura, A. Sińczuch, M. Sińczuch, M. Sochocki) and conference paper "Strategies Towards Youth in Disadvantaged Neighborhood in Poland – Education" (prepared by M. Sińczuch, G. Mańko, D. Walczak, T. Kasprzak), Lipsk 2006.

reforma edukacyjna w 1999 roku). W artykule analizuję niektóre skutki tej reformy oraz efekty działań aktorów społecznych (administracji publicznej szczebla centralnego i samorządowego, organizacji pozarządowych), które stawiają sobie za cel wyrównywanie szans i aktywizację młodzieży i dzieci z mniejszymi szansami. Ponadto w tekście przedstawiony jest schemat relacji pomiędzy wspomnianymi aktorami instytucjonalnymi oraz analiza ograniczeń związanych z działaniami na rzecz dzieci i młodzieży.

Introduction

The educational system always has an ambition to create special actions and solutions for social problems. Of course the definitions of those actions and problems are changing due to time, place, socio-economics, cultural and political circumstances. They find expression in an educational ideology. Even though the educational ideology in Poland since 1989 has changed (during one period the Ministry of Education stressed creative, individual progress of every student, in others the Ministry underlined family values and patriotism) one of the key aims is equalizing educational opportunities.

In this context I would like to analyze the actions taken by institutional actors in the area of equalizing opportunities and diminishing social distances among children and youth in Poland. This description concerns on the one hand centralized actions of the state (the educational system and the central government's project of equalizing chances). On the other hand it concerns attitudes of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in this area. It is also worth looking at relations between these actors, to try to reconstruct logic, consequences and results of actions and initiatives for young people with fewer opportunities and young people from disadvantaged segments of society. I chose to analyze the period 1999–2006 because in 1999 educational reform took place (the reform aimed at equalizing opportunities) and in 2006 some long-term Community Programs finished (e.g. "Youth" Program), so now we can see the results of those initiatives.

Barbara Fatyga in a white paper on Polish youth says: "Young people are seen by adults either as a "hope" or "danger"; either as an "unsolvable problem" or as a "partner in actions for common good... Perceiving young people as partners, not as subjects of given decisions and actions is a condition of modern policy for the youth."²

By analyzing the effects of actions carried out for young people in the years 1999–2006 by public administrations, schools, and the third sector, I will try to answer the question whether these actions form a framework for achieving the goal of cooperation, as the author above suggested.

² B. Fatyga (ed.), *"Biała księga" młodzieży polskiej. Diagnoza sytuacji młodych Polaków jako podstawa strategii państwa dla młodzieży*, MENiS, Warszawa, 2004, p. 13.

Problems of Children and Youth-definition of the Situation and Key Solutions

To analyze how the educational system (formal, non-formal, and informal, governmental and non-governmental) is used to solve social problems on a macro, mezzo, and micro level it is important to see how these problems are defined, ranked, who is responsible for specifying these problems and finally who implements solutions and evaluates their impact.

In educational discourse (as a part of public discourse) we can distinguish two main categories of young people who need special treatment and support:

- young people with fewer opportunities (based on gender, health disability, place of residence, race, ethnicity);
- youth and children in disadvantaged neighborhoods (disadvantaged background).

It is important to understand what these categories mean and what kind of young people they describe. In public discourse in Poland the “disadvantage neighborhood” is regularly connected with rural areas and certain regions of the country (usually northeastern and southeastern parts of today’s Poland).³

In the “Youth” Program the key category of “young people with fewer opportunities” is defined as “young people that are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because they face one or more situations and/or obstacles (social obstacles, economic obstacles, disability, educational difficulties, cultural differences, geographical obstacles).”⁴ This definition is broad and is linked with the category of youth and children in disadvantaged neighborhood. Moreover, it specifies only the location of young people, without indicating consequences of these locations – lower cultural competence and unequal opportunities.

According to the logic of the actions carried out for young people in the years 1999–2006 by public administrations, schools, and the third sector the main solutions proposed for solving the problems of young people with fewer opportunities and young people from disadvantaged neighborhood are:

- equalizing educational opportunities;
- inclusion;
- stimulation and active participation.

Equalizing educational opportunities is the main goal of state initiatives. The biggest national program for equalizing the educational chances of children and youth is a National Program for the years 2006–2008 “Activate and support for Local Self-Government and Non-Governmental Organizations in the field of equalizing educational chances and opportunities of children and youth.”⁵

³ The negative impact of rural localization on educational and employment performance can be described on the basis of several indicators as accessibility of pre-school education, level of achievement and level of unemployment.

⁴ <http://www.salto-youth.net/inclusiondefinition/>

⁵ “Aktywizacja i wspieranie jednostek samorządu terytorialnego i organizacji pozarządowych w zakresie udzielania uczniom pomocy materialnej o charakterze edukacyjnym”.

According to the aims of the educational reform, from 1999 schools are the main institutional actor in the area of equalizing opportunities (especially the new type of junior high schools – *gimnazjum*).

Of course for some non-governmental organizations equalizing educational opportunities is also a crucial goal (especially in rural areas) – e.g. Polish-American Freedom Foundation, the Polish Children and Youth Foundation (the program “Equal Opportunities”), the Center for Citizenship Education (the program “School of Dreams”), the Rural Development Fund (grant program).

Polish and international research shows a low amount of social activity and limited interest of young Poles in voluntary activity.⁶ Similarly, research under the auspices of UEA in 1999 and 2000 shows a dramatically weak commitment of young Poles in public and social life, as well as low participation in associations demanding any activity. Only the students from the Baltic republics (former USSR) achieved lower indicators.⁷ According to the logic of programs and initiatives carried out for young people, stimulation and active participation in practice means involvement in specific actions and projects.

Young People and Institutional Support — Official Data

- a. In the year 2005 there were 5,908,000 young people in the age brackets between 7 and 18 years of age living in Poland (it is the main target group of state and NGOs’ support programs offered to young people);
- b. In the school year 2005/2006 there were 13,800 primary schools, 7031 *gimnazjum* (junior high schools), 2,529 high schools, 6,419 vocational high schools;⁸
- c. In the school year 2002/2003 there were 732,800 teachers employed;
- d. In the framework of the European Social Found in the year 2006 there was financial support for educational initiatives in the amount of 500 million PLN;
- e. In the year 2006 10.3% of NGOs (6,512 out of 55,016 registered associations and 8212 foundations) operate in the area of education.⁹

⁶ B. Fatyga, *Młodość bez skrzydeł. Nastolatki w małym mieście*, Warszawa, Ośrodek Badań Młodzieży, 2001.

⁷ K. Koseła, *Młodzi obywatele – podsumowanie*, in: R. Dolata, K. Koseła, A. Wilkomirska, A. Zielińska, *Młodzi obywatele. Wyniki międzynarodowych badań młodzieży*, Instytut Socjologii UW, Warszawa 2004, p. 228.

⁸ *Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2005/2006*, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2006.

⁹ M. Gumkowska, J. Herbst, *Podstawowe fakty o organizacjach pozarządowych. Raport z badań 2006*, Klon/Jawor, Warszawa 2006, p. 21.

Institutional Actors Engaged in the Process of Equalizing Opportunities and Their Mutual Relations

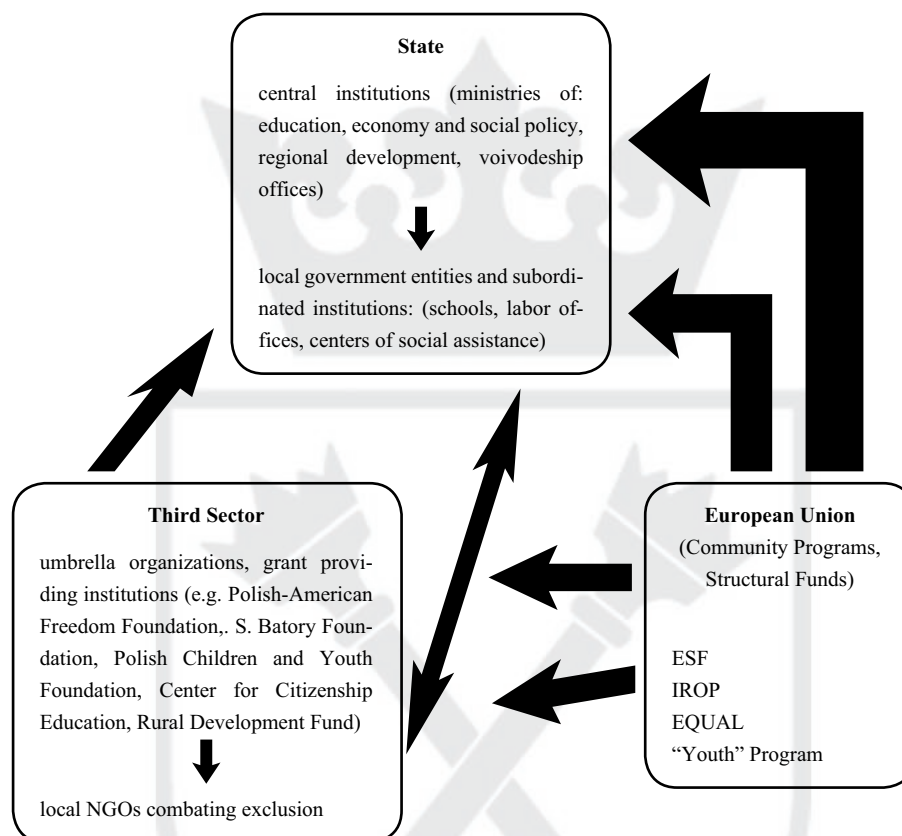


Fig. 1. Net of institutional cooperation – direction of transfer financial and merits-related support¹⁰

Analysis of the above figure shows that cooperation between the subjects is more of a sectoral than intrasectoral character. This means that in general, the first sector (public institutions) and third sector (NGOs), while running programs aimed at equalizing chances, take up their own, often uncomplimentary, actions. A positive exception is cooperation on a local level between entities of local government and local NGOs.¹¹ Here the cooperation usually means that NGOs carry out tasks of local

¹⁰ The figure and table present schematically the relations between the entities. To provide a clear vision, some categories were simplified (e.g. all NGOs dealing with social exclusions were treated as one category, in spite of the big differences among them).

¹¹ It is important to remember that cooperation is possible only in areas where NGO-s exist and they are seen as a good partner by the local government. According to the Klon/Jawor research, the bigger a town, the more NGOs operate. In rural areas 19% of Polish NGOs operate. 69% exist in cities (M. Gumkowska, J. Herbst, op.cit., p. 11).

governments as far as social policy and equalizing opportunities are concerned (e.g. they run Professional Activity Institutes, or Centers for Social Integration). NGOs often participate in the creation of local strategies aimed at solving social problems.

The area of cooperation between the sectors is gradually extended thanks to community programs and structural funds. It is a result of the logic behind initiatives and community programs. They are managed by central institutions on the national level, while their local executors and beneficiaries are both local government institutions and local NGOs. In the area of equalizing chances in education the “Youth” program, carried out between 2000–2006 (and since 2007–2013 called “Youth in Action”) is a good example of effective activities and cooperation.¹² The “Youth” program is a community initiative managed on the national level by the Ministry of National Education, which supports NGOs and informal groups. Hence the program is an important youth policy instrument, supporting the non-governmental sector.¹³

Analyzing actions for young people with fewer opportunities and from unfavorable backgrounds, carried out by state institutions (central and local), and NGOs and run under the framework of community funds, we can distinguish various types of programs. By taking into account the logic of their actions as defined by the type of receivers/ beneficiaries we can identify the following categories:

- programs for young people with specific characteristics (e.g. young handicapped people,¹⁴ representatives of ethnic minorities – programs for Roma,¹⁵ students from low-income families¹⁶);
- programs for young people living in specific dysfunctional societies (e.g. former collective farming system villages).¹⁷ Such projects are taken up by NGOs and local governments, using IROP and ESF funds;¹⁸

¹² Analysis of the “Youth” program evaluation states that the Program, lasting 6 years, became the biggest initiative for youth in Poland, as far as the budget (€27 148 155,84 in the years 2000–2006), number of projects (5,256) and number of participants (10,7816) are concerned. Taking into account its nation-wide character, large budget, links with EU structures and Polish central state institutions (Ministry of National Education) and innovation of the projects, the “Youth” program should be perceived as an important actor on macro processes, dealing with education and the third sector in Poland.

¹³ The “Youth” program played an important role as a channel of communication between young people and central institutions. Participation in the selection committee of the program lets decision makers get in touch with projects designed by young people (including young people from unfavorable backgrounds whose support is the program’s priority) and may learn about young people’s perspectives.

¹⁴ E.g. programs run by the National Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People: “Edukacja – program pomocy w dostępie do nauki dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych” (“Education – support program for access to education for Children and Youth with Disabilities”) and “STUDENT – kształcenie ustawiczne osób niepełnosprawnych” (“Student – constant education of Disabled People”).

¹⁵ E.g. Governmental program for the Roma society in Poland.

¹⁶ E.g. one of the main governmental programs dedicated to equalizing educational chances and opportunities of children and youth – Program of equalizing conditions for starting school for students in 2006 “Wyprawka szkolna” (“My first school equipment”).

¹⁷ E.g. Governmental program for equalizing educational opportunities of students from families of former state-owned farms, for the years 2006–2008 (an element of the National Scholarship Program).

¹⁸ I mean especially the Project carried out in the framework of the action 2.2 IROP – Equalizing educational chances through scholarship programs.

- programs directed both to local communities (their representatives, institutions) and young people (e.g. a program for the countryside: “Szkoła Marzeń” (“School of Dreams”));¹⁹
- programs in which the authors and executors are young people (e.g. Program “Równać Szanse” (“Equal Opportunities”))²⁰ and the “Youth” program.

Of course the classification above does not include all types of projects for young people with fewer opportunities and from unfavorable backgrounds (e.g. programs which support local institutions solving young peoples problems,²¹ charitable programs run by Church and religion organizations). The classification shows a continuum: from institutional programs to grassroots initiatives and from programs where participation of young people is limited to the role of receivers to programs where the participation is broader (young people are authors and executors of projects).

Inclusion — How to Make it Available?

Finally I would like to stress some system-related restrictions connected with actions aimed at diminishing social distances and equalizing opportunities. Generally those restrictions are well known and obvious (and unfortunately appear regularly). To strengthen the system of support of young people with fewer opportunities and to make available the demand of inclusion we should cross the limits listed below:

- a lack of diagnosis of issues based on thorough research concerning different groups of young people and their local communities;
- lack of sufficient knowledge which leads to a situation where action based on common sense is taken up;
- differences in points of view and problem definition;
- a lack of systematic evaluation of the actions taken or evaluation of the whole system and teachers – learning in the educational system takes place through anecdotes, not systematic actions;

¹⁹ Program was carried out in the years 2005 – by Center for Citizenship Education, Methods Center of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance, and Polish Children and Youth Foundation from the funds of the ESF. The program aimed at extending educational and life opportunities of children from the countryside thanks to cooperation of teachers, engagement of the local community and creation of local education development programs. 443 schools from the whole country participated in the program.

²⁰ The Polish-American Freedom Foundation’s Program, “Equal Opportunities” is managed by the Polish Children and Youth Foundation and is an example of a grant program. The purpose of the “Equal Opportunities” Program is to support activities aimed at strengthening the society and creating a nation of active, young people. For six years the program allocated over 11 million PLN and over a thousand projects were successfully implemented. Over 250,000 young people participated in donation projects. Another result of the program is the development of local communities. Thanks to the program over 100 NGOs were formed.

²¹ E.g. “Janko Muzykant. Konkurs na programy wyrównywania szans dzieci ze środowisk wiejskich” (“Janko Muzykant. The contest for programs to equalize opportunities of children from rural communities”) run by the Ministry of Education.

- practical models (strategies for acting) are weakly linked to theoretical models;
- a lack of intellectual background, lobbying for actions aimed at equalizing chances through schools and NGOs, in the further stage, the system cannot design itself. Practically all the activities (planning, implementation and evaluation) are done by the same people – teachers or NGO representatives;
- a lack of an effect-orientation (a no risk orientation; a lack of indicators or criteria to measure effects);
- insufficient cooperation between state institutions (both local and central) with NGOs, in effect taking uncomplimentary actions. Moreover, the contact between schools and some NGOs (organizations promoting tolerance, ecological organizations) was limited by the Ministry of Education (May 2006–August 2007).

Closing

In conclusion I would like to come back to the problem of how young people are perceived by the decision makers and executors of actions and initiatives designed for young people with fewer opportunities and from disadvantaged segments of society. Unfortunately it is common to treat young people as a subject of given decisions, not as responsible partners in initiatives. In the context of the debate about democratization within the educational system, the issue of the democratization of the relationship with students is forgotten and almost contradictory to official Ministry of Education statements and programs (e.g. the “Zero tolerance” program). If we want to perceive initiatives for young people as a good example of the “pedagogy of collective action” (Kahne and Westheimer 2000) we have to try to involve young people in all the activities that are done for them. Unfortunately, not only youth suffer because of the lack of dialogue. Dominika Walczak and Marta Zahorska²² analyzed junior high school (*gimnazjum*) teachers’ opinions about educational reform. They showed that teachers believe that a basic reason of the 1999 education reform’s shortcomings is a lack of participation of teachers in the preparation of the reform. According to the teachers a long list of weak points of the reform is a result of the lack of cooperation between creators of the reform and practitioners – the teachers, whose only role is to put the reform into practice.

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²² D. Walczak, M. Zahorska, *Krajobraz po reformie. Opinie nauczycieli na temat reformy edukacji z 1999 roku*, Wrocław 2006 (in print).

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