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## One Student, Two Schools – About the Problems of Combining Education in Poland and Abroad

**Abstract:** The author draws attention to the disturbing features that make up the educational atmosphere, including expectation of educational obedience from children and adolescents, academic requirements in academic programs, lack of trust in students and teachers. The author of the article describes the situation of a junior high school student, who in one school year must cope with the requirements of two different education systems. She recalls examples of consistent and effective educational activities undertaken at school outside Poland. It proves that the students and their parents activities are supported by methodological mechanisms known for years, and the shortcoming of Polish education is the lack of reflection on the practical understanding of seemingly obvious ideas and goals of education and the separation of native school reality from didactics.

**Keywords:** education crisis, international school, integration, subjectivity, functional methods

Problems connected to teaching have been discussed ever since<sup>1</sup>. Let me recall a book by Jesper Juul *Schools in Crisis* with an important subtitle *What we must do to improve the situation of children, parents and teachers*. This famous Danish teacher concludes:

there has been an enormous pressure on education in almost all Europe. It is in the long run unbearable for children, so it evokes an opposite reaction – like in physics: every action has its reaction – and leads to resistance. (7–8)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an extended version of the lecture delivered in Kraków at the 18th Autumn School of Literature and Polish Language Didactics during the *Dylematy kształcenia polonistycznego w zreformowanej szkole podstawowej* conference, which took place on November 26–27, 2018. A shortened version of the Polish text appeared in the post-conference volume (Kwiatkowska-Ratajczak 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Compare also Schulte-Markwort 2017. In Poland the topic of school pressure was discussed among others by Kłakówna 2003; Matyszkowicz 2007. It is worth mentioning that the problem of educational pressure has rich literature, starting from the interwar period. This topic was also discussed by Sergiusz Hessen, Bogdan Nawroczyński, and Kazimierz Sośnicki.

And further on he notices:

Today's politicians, especially in Germany, France, Austria or Switzerland, would like their children to be taught only by academic scholars. When listening to them, one can get an impression that they would most of all wish for them to be educated only by university professors. This, however, would be a complete disaster. (30)

Expecting educational obedience from children and adolescents, longing of the adults for the return to often mythologized pictures from the past, academic requirements in academic programs, lack of trust in students and teachers – these are just a few features of the educational atmosphere. Although Juul does not write about our national education, still his conclusions are not so remote from what we observe here.

A student, who must face requirements of two different educational systems in one year, is put in an even more complicated situation. And this is the example I would like to focus on. Quite accidentally, one of the schools functions in Poland, and the other one – abroad. What I am interested in, however, is the description, and to be precise, recollection of well-tested didactic mechanisms<sup>3</sup>, not the easily evaluating generalizations concerning Polish education and what the young man and his parents have experienced outside the country.

The family left Poland during a school year. For most of this time, the student attended Grade 7<sup>4</sup> of the native primary school and he spent the last months in an international school. Both institutions are situated in big cities and are Catholic<sup>5</sup>. In both of them, classes comprise of about 20 students and employ small groups of teachers, who know each other well. Nevertheless, the difference in understanding educational goals is already visible when analysing information concerning the main assumptions of the schools functioning.

The homeland institution emphasized most of all its Catholic character and the fact that children are educated in accordance with Catholic faith and ethics, they are presented with the value of individual and social life in the light of Gospel, and that relations between faith, culture and life are exposed there. The school guaranteed high level of education, confirmed by the results of national exams and successes in subject competitions.

The information about the foreign school did not include so many declarations. Functioning in the country where Catholicism is not the dominant religion led to the fact that students had Religious Education, during which they had a task to produce:

<sup>3</sup> That is the role that should be played by the notes appearing in this text, pointing at known, and here only selected as exemplary, literature describing further discussed didactic issues.

<sup>4</sup> Starting age 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> Let me emphasize again that the goal is not to give opinion on specific schools but the reflection on more general educational truths, hence not giving precise details on the location of schools.

a pilgrims guide to Jerusalem showing how they have considered the demands of the three main faiths there and an understanding of the special status of Jerusalem as the Holy City. They have also researched the life of a famous religious person of their choice<sup>6</sup>.

The reading of documents organising the work of the international school reveals the emphasis on the student subjectivity<sup>7</sup>. The points describing the implementation of the program that provides a well-rounded age-appropriate curriculum encompassing the means for academic, social, moral/ethical, and physical growth, based on student needs, entail specific actions offered to young people<sup>8</sup>. The consistency in this field is visible in the ways that the material for all subjects is realised. Similarly to the Religious Education, also during Science:

The majority of the semester was devoted to the Middle School Science Investigation, in which students worked in groups to apply their practical skills to test a research question of personal significance. The assessments of this unit are designed to provide students with a hands-on experience in how the natural sciences approach knowledge and to build upon their practical skills which are a central component of the curriculum.

As part of Mathematics exercises students broadened their knowledge and understanding of the ratios of proportions, probability, figures and angles, but were also tasked with the challenge of creating a Scratch game that demonstrated the difference between theoretical and experimental probability.

On the lessons of the so-called performative music, students continued to learn how to play a chosen instrument and prepared their repertoire for solo and band concerts. Combining action with deepening students' reflection took place even during Physical Education classes. And so:

In the world games unit, students **modified games** from around the world to promote fair play. In the striking and fielding unit students **compared and contrasted** skills in cricket, baseball and tee-ball, identifying both the differences and similarities in the sports. Throughout the human anatomy unit, students **studied** muscles and bones that allow them to perform skills related to invasion games, including handball, basketball, hockey and soccer. [emphasis M.K-R]

<sup>6</sup> This and other quotes come from the written feedback that the student's parents received from the teachers of the international school.

<sup>7</sup> Also this direction of educational activities is widely described in our native psychological, pedagogical and didactic research. Compare e.g., Obuchowski 1983; Jędrychowska 1996; Witkowski 1998; Czerepaniak-Walczak 1999; Adamski, Tchorzewski 1999; Budrewicz, Jędrychowska 1999; Kłakówna 2003: 75–108).

<sup>8</sup> "To proclaim that education aims at comprehensive personality development means to say that the school should depart from the classical model and that agreement can be achieved between personality formation and the integration of the individual into the framework of collective life" (Piaget 1977: 77).

The international Middle School put into practice the combination of actions called by Wiesława Wantuch an integration through attitudes and methods (Wantuch 2005), and the analysis of the syllabus and the observation of its realisation prove that education is focused on team work and formation of social behaviours, developing practical skills and inspiring independent, creative thinking. Moreover, there are two crucial subjects – not often taught in Polish schools. The first one is Organisational Skills, during which Grade 7 students learnt how to make notes, improved presentation skills, discovered benefits coming from active participation in the classes, practised how to be assertive in contacts with teachers and peers, made a video together, and in consequence discovered what it means to be responsible for one's process of learning. The second subject – introduced only in the year 2017/2018 and not evaluated – is the so-called Personal Development. It was aimed at specific needs of student groups and concerned such topics as fears, depression, drugs, stereotypes based on differences and sex identity, positive and negative social interactions or setting goals.

Drawing attention to students' possibilities and needs is also visible in the way that standardized tests are treated. They are supposed to help "plan the learning of the individual students" thanks to thorough educational programs designed by teachers. Their function is formative assessment, due to which the wish to over-standardize the requirements is limited. Tests contribute to the realisation of the rule of effectiveness of teaching, which says that test results depend on the work of a teacher, the talent of a student his home, and the environment where the student was brought up (Okoń 2003: 167–190). Standardization is not a fetish, not everything is measurable, and a young person is also appreciated for the effort he puts in his work.

Subjectivity, matching the curriculum with the age of students, providing scientific and ethical development, looking after emotional and social sphere – these slogans are not only declarations which sound good. This scope of actions was also documented in the cooperation between school and parents. After the first three weeks of a young man's participation in the classes, parents were invited for an individual meeting with teachers. During the conversation they were presented with the teachers' remarks, which were focused not only on the diagnosis of knowledge or subject skills but concerned also his functioning in the class, contacts with friends. The conclusions concerning making and maintaining friendships were the main theme of the reflection. The teachers' focus for the next weeks of the schools year were the tasks connected to these spheres of a student's life. The surprised parents concluded "earlier, we have not experienced a situation when teachers got interested in the way a student existed in his peer group and whether he had any friends in the class."

The mechanisms suggested here confirm that the international school does realise other assumptions included in the school documents. There we read that the main goal of all the actions taken is to support the youth in "guiding them to

achieve a balance of independence and interaction, while developing a strong sense of self-worth, cooperation, and respectful understanding of others.”

This record recalled from the school documents sounds almost like a quote from the work of Juul, who convinced of the importance of the sense of self-worth in basic education and upbringing processes, which is not simple self-confidence but an essential existential feature in one’s development. He proved:

Social pressure to get the best education is not only pointless but also extremely unhealthy because it casts a shadow on the social relationships, most of all between parents and children. /every time our children hear that they must unconditionally meet some school requirements if they do not want to destroy their future, a part of their self-esteem is lost. (8)

And further presenting the basics of pedagogy, Juul wrote:

One Austrian teacher said that only one thing has changed when compared to the times of Maria Theresa: then schools destroyed students, today they also destroy teachers.

We should no longer accept the fact that today’s school destroys the integrity of so many people. (35)

Also in Poland, Polish language teachers, students and parents are under bigger and bigger pressure resulting from the way that educational documents are treated. Let us notice that when the curriculum, which was an unknown document to us before, was introduced in the 1990s for the first time, there was an attempt to write it down with as didactically neutral a language as possible. Their authors and the teachers of Polish were allowed to compose it in accordance with aims they adopted as well as students’ needs. The first general and integral part of the document already pointed to these elements – with reference to linguistic and cultural education. In 1995 it was stressed that:

The core curriculum **does not specify the scope of requirements for students**, but only points at the obligatory paths – ‘common paths’ through which a student must go, which does not equal the standardization of requirements. (Podstawa... *Polonistyka* 1996: 391) [emphasis M.K-R]

How far have we gone from such assumptions is proved by the quotation from *Informator o egzaminie ósmoklasisty z języka polskiego od roku 2018/2019*, which states that

a thorough Polish language education of students’ equaled in the document with the preparation for the final exam, may only be achieved by **“the completion of all the requirements of the core curriculum, the general as well as the specific ones.”** (2017: 5) [emphasis M.K-R]

Such a constraint, being a sign of not having faith in students nor trust in teachers, is not revealed in the international school documents. The

curriculum for English classes, writing and reading workshop, points to the development of writing and reception skills, understanding and discovering the features of fiction and non-fiction literature, gaining skills to participate in discussions about books. The curriculum expands the skills gained in the earlier grades, exhibiting new genres at the same time<sup>9</sup>. It stresses the meaning of reading books that students can choose themselves and allowing small group conversations with teachers, to provide students with individual support. Such actions should – and do – take place every two weeks<sup>10</sup>.

The humanities are planned in such a way to design and “to reinforce and expand the language proficiency of each student to read, write, speak, listen and view critically.” Neither the scopes of skills mentioned in the syllabus (Uryga 1996; Kwiatkowska-Ratajczak 2011) nor the preferred methods similar to popular here ways of analysis and creative imitation of patterns or writing practice are in no way surprising for a Polish educator<sup>11</sup>. The astonishment of parents and the reaction of a student himself prove, however, that they have not appeared in the earlier experienced educational actions too often. Although the young student had to face language barriers, as the teaching process was carried out in English – he showed more than interest in what was going on in this new class. “School is great!” – was the often repeated opinion of the fourteen-year-old. And what did he actually do during classes devoted to literature, culture and language study? In one semester, according to the written record of a teacher and parents observation, the students:

- Read and discussed *Fever 1793* [Laurie Halse Anderson] a historical fiction novel set during the yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia.
- Created a simile project, using a medium of their choice to demonstrate their understanding one of the characters from *Fever 1793*.
- Wrote companion books based on books of their choosing.
- Studied theories of humour and analyzed examples of humour.
- Learned to craft effective arguments while debating the pros and cons of competitive sports.
- Continued developing their digital portfolios using Seesaw software, while reflecting on their progress this semester and identifying ways to improve.

These didactic actions are known to Polish teachers and are used also here, nevertheless, they are not the main directions and methods of teaching and learning. As research shows, not only the core curriculum and curriculum are

<sup>9</sup> In this context it is worth recalling analogical records in our native core curriculum from 1999 and a grid of concepts for an Grade 8 primary school of that time, created by Bożena Chrzastowska back in the 1980s. See Chrzastowska 1983c: 195–199. This popular methodological guide had two subsequent editions, each with tens of thousands of copies.

<sup>10</sup> Similar actions are described in Janus-Sitarz 2016.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Dyduchowi 1988; Dyduchowi 2004–2005; Kłakówna 1993; Kłakówna, Steczko, Wiatr 2003; Buehl 2005. Compare also: Kwiatkowska-Ratajczak 2011.

responsible for certain educational traditionalism. According to the national results from 2017, national schools use electronic media mainly with the aim of transferring knowledge<sup>12</sup>, which is not the result of lack of proper equipment, but didactic habits. Moreover, the survey from 2018 conducted on 270 parents in the Polish school attended by our young man<sup>13</sup>, proved that students, especially from higher grades of primary school – in the opinion of their parents – are overburdened with homework, mainly not involving creativity. However, they rarely prepare presentations, interdisciplinary projects, do linguistic tasks inspiring cooperation in groups or are given tasks involving reflection and independence. According to the surveyed parents, most children and teenagers do not have or have very little free time, and the Grade 7 students have the most duties of all. Students of higher grades also more and more often attend extra private lessons... All these things make it impossible for a present Grade 7 and 8 students to admit that “School is great!”

At the same time, education in the described international middle school turned out to be not only engaging but also effective. It is documented in the written texts, prepared by the student. The early ones are brief, with simple vocabulary, short paragraphs and uncomplicated syntax. When he was preparing a presentation, he was able to look at his personality features with wit, writing e.g.:

As you can read I think I've got mess in room/brain, now I will try to explain how my project fits my simile and then how simile fits myself.

For example is always messy, and my brain is a chaotic collection of thoughts. But as you can read to I haven't got bigger problems with finding things and it is true, such as a sometimes I'm trying to recall something I invented one month ago and it is not a big problem for me. And some thing is with my room. (Simile project)

And... he baked a banana cake by himself, with icing sugar, marshmallows, jelly, coconut and dark chocolate, which was supposed to illustrate this state of mind/room and the way he deals with this seeming mess. How much joy coming up with the concept gave him, how much pleasure brought the writing process, and how satisfying was presenting the project and then tasting the cake with the whole class – of that I do not think I need to convince you. Sense of humour and distance to oneself are also the features that he appreciated in his foreign educators.

Lucidity of some tasks did not interfere with a greater intellectualization of other statements. Writing about sport and health of young people, the student gathered arguments and had to refer to specific sources. He explained that

<sup>12</sup> See Plebańska 2017. The report was prepared on the basis of research conducted in June 2017 on the group of over 100129 respondents: students, parents, teachers and school authorities. More on this topic: Wobalis 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Survey results shared by parents.

he looked for information not only on the Internet, mentioning Wikipedia and a serious fact page of World Health Organisation, but he also stressed the meaning of in-class discussions. When summarising his favourite book – John Flanagan’s *Ranger’s Apprentice. The Ruins of Gorlan* – he focused only on the summary of the plot. The teacher, in his comment, encouraged him to think deeper and asked about the meaning of the selected book in the process of his individual reception.

All the written tasks were analysed with reference to the charts with earlier introduced criteria. The assessment included:

**Elaboration** – The writer included varied kinds of evidence (facts, quotes, examples) as well as analysis. The writer consistently cited sources. The writer brought out why the audience should care about this issue.

**Organization** – The essay is well-organized with all of the following:

- clear introduction
- refutes opposing arguments
- paragraphs with clear topic sentences
- conclusion reinforces the main points.

**Transitions** – The writer consistently used transitions to link the parts of the her argument. The transitions make it clear if she is stating a claim of reason, providing evidence, or refuting.

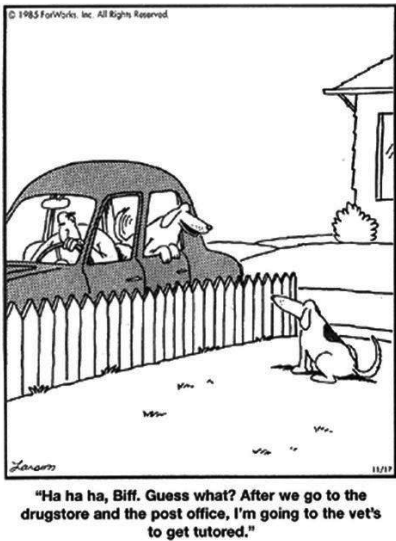
**Editing** – Conventions (complete sentences, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and capitalization) are correct throughout the piece.

In the feedback the teacher marked the extent to which each criterion was fulfilled. For every element of the text, the Grade 7 student could get from 0 to 3 points. His first works were marked somewhere in the middle of the scale, and he got 6–5 points. The progress, however, was so fast that after three or four months, he scored higher and higher in each criterion. What is vital is the fact that when writing a creative essay, he was able to synthesize his story and shorten it to maximum 600 words, he was aware of the contextual references to the *Odyssey*, he noticed the need for a change from the foreground to the background narrative, he understood the role of the oneiric narrative, thanks to which he got the effect of surprise and created certain distance to the story he wrote.

Exposure to different text types, analyses and class discussions, written texts he prepared made it possible for him to acquire knowledge and improve various linguistic skills. In the last aspect very meaningful were also tasks done with a computer program, thanks to which the student mastered very advanced vocabulary, checked in the End-of-Year Test Grade 7. The structure of the test is based on the goals of the education in the international school. Additionally, they were confirmed by the way the knowledge and skills of poetics were verified. In the construction of the tasks, the terms were treated as functional tools



allowing to decode the examples taken not only from everyday life, but also from Shakespeare's drama. Also, such drawing jokes were used:



The student's task was to explain where the joke came from, and this enabled the understanding of such notions as *malapropism* (funny misuse of some word) or *puns* (game of words). At the end of the test – referring to the proper for middle school students, naturally related to their age worldview of humour – a drawing challenge was also designed: *Draw an elephant surfing*.

Young people attending the international school had to use procedural, not: conceptual knowledge. The latter was required in Polish schools in Polish language tests<sup>14</sup> when, after reading the works of Adam Mickiewicz, the students were asked to define the genres of "Świtezianka" and *Dziady, Part II*. They also had to define the rite described by the author explaining where its elements came from, or define the genre of Aleksander Fredro's *Zemsta* (*The Revenge*). When discussing the works of Fredro or Mickiewicz, the emphasis was put on the encyclopaedic knowledge, not on the purpose of reading these old texts, the feelings they evoked (boring-interesting-close-strange-difficult-incomprehensible...) or the reflections ('old language describes human matters' – what the student noticed in an individual conversation...) which – as prove the notes and tests – were not necessarily exposed in the class.

The creators of educational atmosphere are only politicians or ministerial officers. Undoubtedly, they contribute to preserving a specific, unhealthy climate, but in its spread, not only they have its share. There is no real debate in

<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, in 1983, in the essay "Pojąć metaforę..." Chrzęstowska wrote: "the result is not important. The process of learning to read is important." Compare also Chrzęstowska, Wyslouch 1978, 2000; Chrzęstowska 1987; Chrzęstowska, Wójtowicz-Stefańska 2011.

Poland about the meaning of education<sup>15</sup>, no reflection on the practical understanding of seemingly obvious ideas and goals of educating. School reality is detached from university didactics. It was already in 2000 when Krzysztof Kruszewski wrote that pedagogical sciences poorly influencing the thinking of teachers and administrators of education are also to be blamed<sup>16</sup>. But it is also the fact that teachers' compliance with the real and imagined principles of the institutional functioning of the school leads to the situation that the older the students get, the more often they do not like to go to school, do homework, retrieve mechanically learned knowledge and study things of which the usefulness of life they do not realise.

Both positive educational phenomena and highly undesirable methodological actions described here are in fact challenges for the teachers themselves<sup>17</sup> and the academic teachers educating them. We must repeat the question: why does something that has existed in the didactic theory for so long, still so often deviate from school practice? There is no ready answer. I rather conclude that after many years I would have to repeat many theses contained in one of my first scientific papers delivered in Warsaw at the 7th Methodical Conference "Student as a partner and a subject in the didactic process" (Kwiatkowska-Ratajczak 1991, 59–72).

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<sup>15</sup> Also Kłakówna 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See Kruszewski 2000. Since then the gap between school and didactic knowledge probably deepened even more.

<sup>17</sup> "A teacher becomes a teacher by practicing his profession. He becomes it primarily thanks to his own effort to understand and change himself, thanks to self-reflection and the personality changes that it causes" – years ago wrote Kwaśnica 1994: 44.

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