

Janusz Stanek
Academy of Physical Education
Katowice, Poland

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Silesian teachers in the face of European integration

Abstract

The aim of education in the uniting Europe is to teach people of different cultures, religions and nationalities how to live together in peace. In the political aspect, it means bringing about rapprochement between nations.

In Polish circumstances, Europeanism in the school context means carrying out activities aimed at making pupils realize the existence of the European Union, as well as its objectives and guiding rules. European education assumes that the European Community should be perceived not only in the institutional, economic or political perspective, but mainly in the human one, as related to ever tightening bonds within the frameworks of the Old Continent that build an integrated community. However, the consciousness of the on-going changes can hardly be acknowledged as prevailing and well founded, since the probing research reveals that the knowledge of European problems among present and future Polish teachers from the Upper Silesian region is only fragmentary. Such a state of affairs should be a subject of reflection, especially in view of Poland's imminent accession to the European Union.

Key words: European integration, European Union, teacher, Europeanism, European dimension of education

Introduction

At present Poland is at the stage of an intensive implementation of programs adapting it to the solutions effective in the European Union (Bernardt, Conrad, 1993). Education is undoubtedly one of the domains determining the possibility of rational transformations in the remaining areas of the state functioning. Although it is characterised by a significant conservatism and its effects are noticeable in long-term cycles only, its importance for social life is fundamental (Dzich, 1997, p. 41).

The research carried out by me in the area of the Silesian Province (*województwo śląskie*) was supposed to answer the question, how present and

prospective teachers, as people creating the school reality, perceive the process of European unification and its implications for education. Below, I have presented the most general conclusions from the research conducted in 2001 and 2002. The survey making the essential part of the empirical investigation covered 1486 respondents (both teachers and teachers-to-be) properly representing the general population in respect of its significant social and demographic features.

1. The attitude of teachers and students with a teaching major to European education

The aim of education in the uniting Europe is to teach people of different cultures, religions and nationalities how to live together in peace (Bernert, Van Dijk, Sand er, 1993). In the political aspect, it means bringing about rapprochement between nations. The so defined educational task, approved as an axiom, is accepted by three fourths of teachers and student!>.

The attitude towards European integration and the European Union itself originates from the respondents' knowledge on the subject. The highest number of respondents from both examined groups describe their knowledge on the Union as sufficient, with teachers having generally a greater knowledge. When we additionally take into consideration the results of a test on EU (the test included a list of twenty simple questions concerning symbols and the most elementary issues related to EU), it seems reasonable to conclude that teachers have a better grasp of political, social and economic processes of the contemporary Europe. (It follows probably from the fact that teachers gain their knowledge on the European Union in connection with the duties fulfilled, whereas students either do not have in the course of their studies any subjects pertaining to European problems or the program or duration of the classes they participate in is insufficient.)

The general attitude towards EU is an issue of enormous importance for other areas. In the respondents' opinion, teachers who give the strongest endorsement to the integration are those with the shortest period of service, whereas teachers with the longest, over a 20-year period of professional experience, favour it to the least extent.

The problem frequently discussed among teachers is that of EU educational standards. Like any other elements of systemic, general and inevitable nature, they encounter some resistance of "educational body": nevertheless they do not destroy more or less positive attitude of two thirds of respondents towards the education provided according to new rules. However, the students' attitude to actions aimed at establishing the EU education model in Poland is definitely

different from that of the teachers~ The students perceive the teachers as less favourably disposed to considered transformations than they themselves admit it. Among the teachers, the difference is definitely less er, although advocates of the changes are also in the minority here.

The reason for the above is undoubtedly the teachers' attitude to EU, as conditioned by many aspects. The key issue here is the ability to adapt oneself to new conditions, i.e. a specific professional flexibility. It follows from the research that teachers will tend to have difficulties in adapting themselves to EU conditions.

Both the teachers and the students perceive in the same way the consequences of Poland's integration with EU in the field of education. In both groups, over half of the respondents maintain that the results will be advantageous. The favourable changes will be related in the first place to such domains as: skill upgrading, access to professional literature, legal protection, pay and working conditions. Teachers expect advantageous changes to be less frequent in the spheres of professional advancement, the scope of responsibilities, relations at work and the work period required for retirement.

2. The professional condition of Polish teachers in the days of the European integration

Undoubtedly, the perspective of European integration determines the process of self-determination of the professional teacher group. It is important for teachers' professional state of mind since it will have a powerful impact on their professional position and economic conditions for years to come. Among the surveyed, the most numerous group is represented by teachers who are not able to state clearly if they perceive European integration in education as a threat or a chance. For one third of those surveyed, the integration in education is a threat, whereas every fourth teacher perceives the process as chance for them.

In the opinion of one third of the teachers and a half of the students, the planned integration with EU positively affects the teachers' level of motivation for work. Every third teacher and every sixth student are of a different opinion. In this case the disproportion is significant and it follows from the result that at present the teachers show less motivation for fulfilling their duties than indicated by the students' belief.

In spite of such an attitude to their professional duties, Polish teachers envy their colleagues from UE their working conditions and pay, while showing hardly any interest in the methodical side of their work. The above follows from the teachers' trust in their own abilities and effects of their work as well as

from their conviction that Polish educational system ensures a proper level of teaching. On the basis of study results, we may also say that the belief in educational progress within the Union's frame of reference is half as strong among the teachers as among their future colleagues, while their conviction on the continuous nature of future changes is much stronger. It follows from the above that people who currently work as teachers are less inclined than students to stress the progressive nature of what is going to happen in the future because otherwise they would have to question the quality of their own work.

Considering the above observations, one must inevitably relate them to the low level of pay, which is the most frequent reason for embitterment among teachers. A vast majority of respondents believe that teachers' economic status is poor, therefore it cannot positively affect their sense of social security, and hence the level of satisfaction from the profession they practise. Another bad symptom is the fact that most of the respondents do not believe that Poland's accession to EU will improve teachers' economic status. Among those who believe in positive changes in the material sphere, the students prevail, as they hope that in the future, they will be able to live at a decent level by their work as teachers.

Conclusion

The research project was crowned by a verification of the set hypotheses. It must be stressed that the vast majority of them were confirmed by the figures obtained, figures which are an exemplification of the respondents' thoughts, opinions and knowledge. As it has already been mentioned, the higher level of European knowledge among the teachers as compared with that of the students is a bit surprising. The results of empirical studies reflect the definite state of mind of both present and future teachers, so it is only right to ask a question, whether and how the current integration process, as intertwined with the educational reality, is reflected in their consciousness? On the basis of the research conducted, we may say that this is the case, although it is difficult to perceive any enthusiasm in their attitude. Should we be disturbed by this? Well, not really, although we should wish that children and youth in Poland had as guides contemporary coryphaei, not only equipped with a proper volume of knowledge but also believing in their mission, capable of teaching and bringing up children in the belief that words merely model characters, whereas examples have the power to build them.

The study results reveal that representatives of the teaching profession, the one commonly believed to be the most humanistic among intellectual professions, should contribute still new, precious values to the legacy of our region.

However, this will not be the case unless their environmental perception goes out beyond the existing perspective and reaches for new objectives. Such an objective, the most topical one in the public aspect, is Poland's participation in the European Union's structure.

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