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## Structural and curriculum reforms in Polish education in 1998–2017 in the *Polityka* weekly

### Abstract

A thorough reform of the education system, which constituted one of the foundations of Jerzy Buzek's government four major reforms, followed a decade later by a reform of the core curriculum of Minister Katarzyna Hall, and finally the controversial reform of the education system carried out by Anna Zalewska, under which the middle schools, which have been a part of the system since 1999 are now gradually shut down – all these events have been reflected in numerous publications, appearing, among others, in leading opinion-forming weeklies in Poland.

One of such weeklies is *Polityka*, which has been published continuously since 1957, and which featured dozens of articles about education and reforms over the course of the last 20 years. This paper offers a concise analysis of the texts published in the magazine, the issues raised and the attitude of the authors towards the changes introduced in the subsequent years in the Polish education system.

**Keywords:** reforms of education, education, history of the polish press

A thorough reform of the education system, which constituted one of the foundations of Jerzy Buzek's government four major reforms, followed a decade later by a reform of the core curriculum of Minister Katarzyna Hall, and finally the controversial reform of the education system carried out by Anna Zalewska, under which the middle schools, which have been a part of the system since 1999 are now gradually shut down – all these events have been reflected in numerous publications, appearing, among others, in leading opinion-forming weeklies in Poland. Since education issues are of great interest to a large part of the society, it is worth taking a closer look at how the above-mentioned issues were presented and commented on in articles published in *Polityka*, one of the most popular Polish weeklies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In January 2018, *Polityka* was the second best-selling weekly magazine, after *Gość Niedzielny* in: <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/sprzedaz-tygodnikow-opinii-w-styczniu-2018-roku> (retrieved on: 25.06.2018). For more, cf.: WŁADYKA, W., "Polityka" i jej ludzie, Warszawa 2007.

The year 1989, which was a breakthrough in Poland's most recent history, did not bring about any radical changes in the education system. For the next decade, Poland had a two-tier general education system based on an 8-year primary school and a 4-year high school. This shape of Polish schooling system was introduced by the *Act on the Development of the Education and Upbringing System*, which entered into force in 1961 and introduced a fully secular organisation of the education process and extended compulsory education to include 17-year-olds.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that the 1970s brought a number of attempts to introduce the so-called ten-year schools,<sup>3</sup> based on the Soviet system, the growing economic crisis and the related financial difficulties, as well as staffing problems and resistance of the society, led to abandoning this idea in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, the postulates of various political parties and groups, who proclaimed the need for fundamental changes in the Polish education system, grew louder and louder. Such opinions also appeared in *Polityka*. For the purpose of this study, articles published in the *Polityka* weekly magazine from 1998 to 2017 were analysed. The first date is connected with the introduction of the school system reform – a thorough structural and curriculum change, implemented by Minister Mirosław Handke. As a result, 6-year primary schools, 3-year middle schools, as well as 3-year specialised high schools and vocational schools were created in Poland, starting on the 1st of September 1999.<sup>5</sup>

Minister Handke was featured in the *Polityka* weekly as early as in the first January issue of 1998, where he announced the initial changes planned for the reform, including a new form of the *matura* exam, a final exam after primary school and a compulsory *matura* exam in mathematics.<sup>6</sup> Also in January, Handke announced the main assumptions and objectives of the reform during a meeting with curators and rectors of universities in Poznań. In addition to presenting changes concerning the structure of the education system, the minister also announced the introduction of exams after each stage of education, qualifying students for high school and university studies, respectively. The responsibility for their preparation and organisation would be independent state examination boards – both central and local. An important *novum* in this respect was also the decision to introduce a six-stage professional development path for teachers (trainee, contract teacher, teach-

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<sup>2</sup> Act of 15 July 1961 on the Development of the Education and Upbringing System, *Dziennik Ustaw* [Journal of Laws] of 1961, no. 32, item 160. See also: PECHERSKI, M., ŚWIĄTEK, M., *Organizacja oświaty w Polsce w latach 1917–1969. Podstawowe akty prawne*, Warszawa 1972, pp. 81–90, 254–266; KRAJEWSKI, M., *Historia wychowania i myśli pedagogicznej*, Płock 2006, p. 244 et seq.

<sup>3</sup> Resolution of the Sejm of the Polish People's Republic of 13 October 1973 on the national education system, *Monitor Polski* [hereinafter: M.P.] 1973, No. 44, item 260.

<sup>4</sup> KRAJEWSKI, M., op. cit., pp. 248–249.

<sup>5</sup> Act of 25 July 1998 amending the Act on the Education System, *Dz. U.* [Journal of Laws] of 1998, No. 117, item 759; Act of 8 January 1999 Legislation Introducing the Reform of the School System, *Dz. U.* [Journal of Laws] of 1999, No. 12, item 96.

<sup>6</sup> “Wystarczy nie przeszkadzać. Rozmowa z prof. dr. hab. Mirosławem Handke, ministrem edukacji narodowej”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 1, pp. 24–25.

er, specialist, certified teacher and professor of education).<sup>7</sup> Ewa Nowakowska brought all these assumptions closer to the readers of *Polityka*. In the article “Bryk szkolny”, emphasising the need for change and criticising the previous encyclopaedic way of teaching, Nowakowska highlighted a certain important problem of the Polish educational policy:

As a country, we could aspire to a world championship in the field of unrealised ideas for modern education. Almost every second of the forty-one post-war ministers came up with a draft reform, every fourth started to implement it, but in most cases their successors had different ideas and started their own reforms. [...] We lead the way in total and reforms: without pilot programmes on a local scale, without analysing the results of the work of their predecessors.<sup>8</sup>

In the following weeks, several articles appeared in *Polityka*, presenting the planned changes in the secondary school leaving exam (syllabi, obligatory *matura* exam in mathematics, coding of exam sheets, external proctors)<sup>9</sup>, the idea of introducing the so-called educational vouchers<sup>10</sup> by the government and postulating the necessity of exchanging teaching staff that was trained mostly in the realities of the former political system, and developing new methods and forms of teacher training.<sup>11</sup> Soon, there were also articles critical of the announced test form of exams. Analysing the Polish language exams prepared in Wałbrzych by the Local Student Competence Testing Centre, Zofia Kłakówna clearly stated:

The method of examination determines the way of preparing for the examination. [...] This kind of tests only serve to present a semblance of changes at school. [...] The tests are aimed at reproducing facts – checking encyclopaedic knowledge. All that is examined is the knowledge of random trivia, completely detached from any context.<sup>12</sup>

This issue resurfaced again in the magazine in 2002, when the first cohort of middle school students took the exam, which was supposed to be one of the important elements taken into account during the recruitment to high schools. In the same year, almost seven thousand high school students decided to take the secondary school leaving exams in a new formula. In the article titled “Chrzest testów” published on this occasion, its authors highlighted yet another issue – gifted, well-read students thinking in original and

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<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the Regulation encompassed four levels of professional advancement – trainee, contract teacher, nominated teacher and certified teacher: Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 3 August 2000 on the professional advancement of teachers, Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] of 2000, no. 70, item. 825. The honorary title of Professor of Education has also been awarded since 2008: Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 4 September 2008 on the Chapter for Professors of Education, Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] of 2008, no. 163, item 1017.

<sup>8</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Bryk szkolny”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 6, pp.16–17.

<sup>9</sup> SUŁEK, K., “Nadciągają sylabusy”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 20, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> “Król bon. Rozmowa z Jerzym Millerem, podsekretarzem stanu w Ministerstwie Finansów”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 20, pp. 87–89.

<sup>11</sup> KULERSKI, W., “Klasy strachu”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 22, pp. 20–22.

<sup>12</sup> KŁAKÓWNA, Z. A., “Kogel-mogel na głowie”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 17, p. 80.

unconventional ways may have problems with passing the exams, because the exam sheet is accompanied by an answering key, and all answers need to comply with it. An outstanding student can give answers, which are not taken into account by the key, thus failing the exam or receiving a score which definitely does not correspond to the actual level of their knowledge and competencies.<sup>13</sup>

During the months preceding the start of the school year, several articles by Ewa Nowakowska appeared in *Polityka*, in which the author pointed out a number of issues connected with the reform. In her article “Szkoła: instrukcja obsługi”, she once again reminded the readers about the main assumptions of the planned changes – block teaching replacing individual subjects in primary school, middle schools modelled on the Jędrzejewicz reform enacted in 1932, cross-subject curricula, as well as new stages of teachers’ professional advancement. It is worth pointing out, however, what the author described as a “catalogue of doubts.” Among them, she mentions compulsory schooling from the age of 7 rather than 6, which stood in the opposition towards the European trend, and the extension of primary education to six years, as the most important issues. According to Nowakowska, another disadvantage of the reform was also the introduction of only one foreign language and only from the fourth grade of primary school, the lack of ethics as an alternative for students who do not want to attend religion classes, the predicted huge increase in educational bureaucracy, pertaining to the creation of a new network of schools, as well as the lack of activities aimed at restoring the status of the teaching profession.<sup>14</sup>

Ewa Nowakowska pointed out the need to improve the image of the teaching profession in the social perception, convincing teachers to go with the reform and the need for a significant increase in salaries in education numerous times,<sup>15</sup> but in the quoted article she drew attention to a different, although already emphasised problem:

Initially, the new school will have to make do with the old staff – frustrated and sceptical towards changes. Nearly 70% of all teachers are people with long and very long experience, and there is an apparent generational gap that the authors of the reform will have to fill as soon as possible.<sup>16</sup>

After President Aleksander Kwasniewski signed the Act bringing about the reform of the school system, the weekly started publishing articles on the difficulties faced by municipalities – the actual executors of ministerial decrees. Most of the problems were re-

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<sup>13</sup> NIEZGODA, A., NOWAKOWSKA, E., CZUBAJ, M., “Chrzest testów”, *Polityka*, 2002, no. 20, pp. 16–20. The issue of exam-mania appeared in the magazine in the subsequent years, cf. NIEZGODA, A., “Zmowa testowa”, *Polityka*, 2004, no. 49, pp. 90–91; PODGÓRSKA, J., “Ucz się pod klucz”, *Polityka*, 2011, no. 19, pp. 14–16; eadem, “Mniej niż zero”, *Polityka*, 2011, no. 21, p. 28; ŻAKOWSKI, J., “Odkuwanie głów”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 20, pp. 16–18.

<sup>14</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Szkoła: instrukcja obsługi”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 23, pp. 3–8.

<sup>15</sup> Eadem, “Przyjęcie bez kucharza”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 36, p. 32–34; eadem, “Gra w kartę”, *Polityka*, 1998, no. 43, pp. 80–82; eadem, “Gimbusem do przodu”, *Polityka*, 1999, no. 5, pp. 76–77.

<sup>16</sup> Eadem, “Szkoła: instrukcja...”, p. 6.

lated to financial issues. It was assumed that the reform would be a foundation of actual equalisation of educational opportunities and a better start for rural youth. Each middle school was supposed to have a computer lab and an appropriate gymnasium, and teachers of particularly desirable subjects (such as foreign languages and computer science) should be encouraged to come to the countryside with special salary bonuses.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the reality in municipalities turned out to be completely different. Local communities often disagreed with decisions to close primary schools in given towns or the planned locations of middle schools,<sup>18</sup> while the municipalities themselves were often not able to cope financially with the tasks at hand. The problem of necessary repairs and buying equipment for the computer labs were exacerbated by the so-called hidden costs of the reform – a job for the school bus driver, fuel and the cost of repaying the loan for the purchase of a school bus, if the ministry did not manage to provide such a vehicle.<sup>19</sup>

The chaos in the textbook market was another issue. Teachers gained freedom in the choice of the preferred curriculum and textbook, which gave rise to a real fight for the customer. However, due to the very late publication of the core curriculum, and thus specific subject curricula, the publishers had only a few months to prepare their textbooks.<sup>20</sup> The problem of textbooks and their quality was raised several more times in *Polityka*. The vastness of the publishing offer made it virtually impossible for the teacher to get acquainted with all the publications available on the market, and their content often left much to be desired. Many textbooks contained factual and grammatical errors, and the majority of them were simply refreshed editions of old books with improved layout and graphic design, overloaded with information, not adjusted to the intellectual capabilities of the average student.<sup>21</sup> In 2002, Piotr Sarzyński reported that at every stage of education, from kindergarten to secondary school, it is possible to use 818 curricula and 1458 textbooks. He also put forward the familiar accusations concerning the latter – substantive and language errors, large volumes (often comprising hundreds of pages) and the ever-present focus on encyclopaedic knowledge in the textbook narratives.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting picture of the reform emerges from articles published in the first year of the functioning of middle schools. In September 1999, Ewa Nowakowska informed that school buses ended up in only 190 out of 1600 municipalities eligible to get such vehicles. This, of course, caused great difficulties in transporting children and growing parents' dissatisfaction. She also quoted the results of a study conducted by the Public Affairs Institute, which showed that 89% of teachers at that time were in favour of reforming

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<sup>17</sup> Eadem, "Odchudzenie marzeń", *Polityka*, 1999, no. 9, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> PYTLAKOWSKI, P., "Dorzuci się wygodkę", *Polityka*, 1999, no. 12, pp. 28–29; SOCHA, R., "Szkoła białych owiec", *Polityka*, 1999, no. 15, pp. 26–27.

<sup>19</sup> PYTLAKOWSKI, P., "Kryptonim Gimbus", *Polityka*, 1999, no. 14, pp. 30–32.

<sup>20</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., "Kleks i spółka", *Polityka*, 1999, no. 35, pp. 61–62.

<sup>21</sup> MIKOŁAJEWSKA, B., "Aby na listę", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 37, pp. 20–22; NOWAKOWSKA, E., "Dziecko pod ceglami", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 38, pp. 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> SARZYŃSKI, P., "Podręczniki do tablicy!", *Polityka*, 2002, no. 35, pp. 3–9.

education as such; however, only 22% were in favour of the reforms introduced by Minister Handke (including 5% of supporters who supported the reform without reservations).<sup>23</sup>

In the next issue of the magazine, the same author informed about dramatic budget shortages in municipalities, which could not afford the implementation of the reform. Local governments complained that 60% of their budgets were spent on education. The scale of the phenomenon could also be evidenced by the fact that 3500 middle schools were planned to be opened, and ultimately the overall number of such schools slightly exceeded 5000.<sup>24</sup> In this article, Ewa Nowakowska pointed out this phenomenon, which would soon become one of the main arguments of opponents of middle schools, for the first time:

[...] The schools take in adolescent children, in the development period that is the most difficult in terms of education – full of anxiety, rebellion and searching for their own, independent path. In addition to the implementation of the new curriculum, middle school teachers will have to face greater psychological and social challenges.<sup>25</sup>

In subsequent articles, the author presented the realities of functioning of middle schools, the number of which grew to 4834 in September 2000 (2270 in cities and towns, as well as 2564 rural middle schools). According to the data quoted in the text, more than 68% of schools of this type shared buildings and staff with primary schools, creating artificial 9-grade schools, operating in the conditions that were much worse than before. Nearly three hundred schools constituted the so-called virtual middle schools, which did not have buildings of their own, instead individual grades were scattered in different primary schools. More than two hundred schools formed school complexes with high schools (usually reputable ones) while only a little more than a thousand middle schools were independent entities. It should be added that in large cities, some schools formed rather large combines with 20 and more branches of a single grade (the record was set by a school with 28 branches.) In this situation, avoiding educational difficulties was all but impossible.<sup>26</sup>

Articles on violence in middle schools, hazing, problems with early sexual initiation, teen pregnancies, addictions and aggression – including against teachers, retaining secu-

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<sup>23</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Belfer w reformach”, *Polityka*, 1999, no. 36, pp. 60–62. The problem of the lack of school buses was signalled in 2002, in the third year of the process of implementing the reforms, by Igor T. Miecik. According to his article, by that time school buses were available in one in four municipalities, and the minister’s promise of “a school bus in every municipality”, quickly mutated to a school bus in every rural municipality, then in every other municipality, every fifth municipality, to a school bus loan and so on. MIECIK, I. T., “Gimbustyka”, *Polityka*, 2002, no. 44, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Sześć dodać trzy”, *Polityka*, 1999, no. 37, pp. 72–73.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Idzie goły do szkoły”, *Polityka*, 2000, no. 36, pp. 72–73; Cf. eadem, “Ósma w kącie”, *Polityka*, 1999, no. 42, pp. 80–81; MIZERSKI, S., “Nowa szkoła”, *Polityka*, 2001, no. 3, pp. 3–9; “Uczeń ma prawo płakać. Rozmowa z Mirosławą Kątną, psychologiem, o szkolnych stresach i zagrożeniach”, *Polityka*, 2001, no. 35, pp. 66–67.

rity companies, installing CCTV, etc., have appeared in *Polityka* numerous times.<sup>27</sup> After several years since the introduction of this type of schools, it was therefore necessary to look at this aspect of the reform, which did not work as intended at that point:

You see a 13-year-old human being: no longer a child, not yet an adult. Rebellious, though they don't yet know what they're doing. Emotionally unstable, with no idea of what adulthood looks like. They don't want to be weak, but they don't know how to be strong. And it is at that precise point when the reform yanks them out of the existing environment, throwing them to fight for their standing and respect in the new middle school herd. In order to stand out, they go for the simplest ways to show their adulthood: drugs, violence and so on.<sup>28</sup>

However, the words of Professor Zbigniew Izdebski, a pedagogue and sexologist are also important in this context. He stated that:

Middle schools as a concept are a bull's eye. This school segment perfectly fits the separate stage of development of a human being, human development. Getting everyone together under one roof is recommended in this case, but on the other hand, middle school is such a delicate stage, so that a teacher should be more of a tutor. The problem is that nobody teaches the teacher to be one in a proper way.<sup>29</sup>

The problem of appropriate education of teaching staff, consistent with the emerging needs has been postulated many times in the *Polityka* weekly. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the 21st century, the situation of the school system still left a great deal to be desired. In one of the issues, the NIK report, which was developed after carrying out an audit of 14 universities, was analysed. It showed that the majority of students of teaching faculties (50–70%) were educated in extramural mode. The didactic plans of such studies blatantly deviated from the guidelines of the General Council for Higher Education concerning minimum requirements. The extramural students attended only 1/3 of the classes available to full-time students, and the staff at such studies were usually recruited from among assistants and adjuncts. The facilities and libraries also had many shortcomings. The report also draws attention to the deficiencies of the Ministry – the lack of developed standards of education and teachers' preparation or even as much as a draft regulation on the required qualifications.<sup>30</sup>

In April 2000, Ewa Nowakowska introduced the readers of *Polityka* to the project of secondary education reform, sanctioning the creation of 3-year specialised high schools

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<sup>27</sup> NIEZGODA, A., "Szkoła bez klasy", *Polityka*, 2005, no. 38, pp. 34–36; BUNDA, M., "Panny na wgnaniu", *Polityka*, 2005, no. 45, pp. 6–12; WINNICKA, E., "Wojna szkolna", *Polityka*, 2006, no. 22, pp. 6–13; BUNDA, M., "Trzech na Marka", *Polityka*, 2006, no. 49, pp. 92–95; KOŁODZIEJCZYK, M., "Gnojki", *Polityka*, 2012, no. 43, pp. 26–28; TURLEJ, E., "Dziewczynki po biuście", *Polityka*, 2014, no. 10, pp. 26–29; "Szkoły przetrwania. Rozmowa z Małgorzatą Jonezy-Adamską, psycholożką i pedagożką, o tym, kto i dlaczego jest dziś napiętnowany i prześladowany w szkole", *Polityka*, 2015, no. 17, pp. 27–29.

<sup>28</sup> NIEZGODA, A., "Szkoła bez klasy...", p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., "Pani od niczego", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 33, pp. 72–73.

and 2-year vocational schools. In the absence of technical secondary schools, their functions were to be taken over by the above-mentioned high schools, teaching according to one of five profile types – academic, technical-technological, agricultural-environmental, social-service and cultural-artistic. At this level, the education would be crowned with a *matura* exam – secondary school leaving exam in the Polish language, mathematics, foreign language and one subject chosen by the student. The result of this examination would serve as the basis for recruitment to higher education institutions. Such a form of secondary education, in accordance with the assumptions of Minister Handke, was supposed to promote better access of young people to education and increase the number of students with secondary school-leaving certificate from less than 30% to 80%.<sup>31</sup>

Yet another problem, which was highlighted by the author of the article, was the issue of expected redundancies among teachers, since out of 170,000 teachers working in the field of education in secondary schools, as many as 90,000 were employed in technical schools at that time.<sup>32</sup> The discord in the teaching community was also exacerbated by the entry of the amended Teacher's Charter into force, which introduced new professional advancement levels and stages.<sup>33</sup> For many teachers, this change was a net loss, and the tensions were further increased by the lack of pay raises announced by the government and resulting from the above-mentioned amendment.<sup>34</sup>

The breakthrough year of 2002 aroused a lot of fears and doubts, which could be seen on the pages of *Polityka*. It was the first year for the Polish students to face a new form of middle school exam and a new secondary school leaving exam. Minister Krystyna Łybacka postponed the latter, which was obligatory for all students, to 2005, while bringing technical secondary schools back from oblivion.<sup>35</sup> However, the issue of recruitment to secondary schools and universities still remained, as they often did not want to consider the result of the *matura* exam as the only binding criterion to be taken into account during the recruitment process, especially for the most attractive majors. Also in secondary schools the result of the middle school examination was to constitute only 50% of the points possible to obtain in the recruitment process. The rest was made up of students' grades and points awarded for additional achievements.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Eadem, "Niebieskie migdały?", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 27, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Act of 18 February 2000 amending the Teacher's Charter Act and certain other acts, Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] of 2000, No. 19, item 239.

<sup>34</sup> Cf.: NOWAKOWSKA, E., "Szlaban na kartę", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 23, p. 92; eadem, "Ktoś nie umie liczyć", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 27, p. 67; eadem, "Podwyżki przez obniżki", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 41, pp. 76–77; eadem, "Więcej, czyli mniej", *Polityka*, 2000, no. 44, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> Eadem, "Próba niskiej próby", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 39, pp. 104–106; eadem, "Lekcja niewychowawcza", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 43, pp. 3–8; eadem, "Kontreformacja", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 44, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> NIEZGODA, A., "Wygimbus", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 16, pp. 78–79; NOWAKOWSKA, E., "Szkoła improwizacji", *Polityka*, 2001, no. 25, pp. 79–80; HUCUŁ, A., "Wolność, równość, nadgorliwość", *Polityka*, 2002, no. 27, pp. 89–90. In 2005, when all secondary school graduates took the new secondary school-leaving exams, the *Polityka* weekly informed that entrance exams at many universities were replaced by the so-called pre-

The analysis of the examination results from 2002 brought unexpected observations and conclusions, which were developed by a team of scientists from the Institute of Geography and Spatial Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Readers of *Polityka* could read them in an article with a characteristic title: “Polska dzielnicowa.”<sup>37</sup> The first exams after primary and middle school revealed some interesting conclusions. A map of the results prepared by the above-mentioned team of researchers clearly showed great regional diversity. Particularly stark differences were noted between the western and northern territories, which had the worst scores, and the rest of the country. Another great divide was noted between urban and rural scores. The high examination score was influenced both by the economic situation in the region and the resulting general living conditions and access to education, but also by broadly understood historical and cultural heritage. The analysis stressed that the higher the local expenditure on education per student, the better the examination results were. The number of teachers per every hundred students was also significant – the higher the number, the better the result. What came out as a surprise to no one, the highest scores were recorded in large cities, with diverse network of schools and rich educational offer. The worst results were recorded in the former state-owned farm villages, characterised by high unemployment rate, as well as low education rates and low aspirations of students’ parents.<sup>38</sup>

The results of the 2002 exams made it clear that the middle schools established only three years earlier not only did not have to bridge any educational gap, but they could even deepen it further. The editors of *Polityka* pointed out such a danger in earlier articles, writing about categorising students and creating elite classes,<sup>39</sup> as well as about the worrying decrease in teenage education rate in rural areas, where one in five teenagers never went on to any school beyond primary education.<sup>40</sup> The words of Mariusz Czubaj can serve as a summary of the image of a Polish school after the reform:

Middle schools turned out to be the least successful offspring of this reform, confirming that even good assumptions can turn against their authors. Middle schools were supposed to even out the differences between students and give opportunities to children from socially handicapped backgrounds; while it turned out that this threshold is the most selective point in the entire course of education process and, instead of ensuring equal opportunities, it deepens the inequalities weighing on the rest of life.<sup>41</sup>

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disposition tests. At the University of Warsaw, such a test was planned for 34 out of 76 majors: CZUBAJ, M., “Egzamin nieufności”, *Polityka*, 2005, no. 7, pp. 36–37.

<sup>37</sup> NOWAKOWSKA, E., “Podział dzielnicowy”, *Polityka*, 2002, no. 45, pp. 89–91.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> NIEZGODA, A., “Nowa walka klasowa”, *Polityka*, 2001, no. 40, pp. 32–33.

<sup>40</sup> Eadem, “Marzenia szyte na miarę”, *Polityka*, 2004, no. 14, pp. 90–92. In later years, the issues of elite middle schools, the phenomenon of segregation in schools and omnipresent rankings were raised in the magazine a number of times. Cf.: SOWA, A., “Elitarni”, *Polityka*, 2006, no. 1, pp. 74–76; WINNICKA, E., “Dzieci i dzieci-śmieci”. *Polityka*, 2008, no. 26, pp. 89–91.

<sup>41</sup> CZUBAJ, M., “13-16-19”, *Polityka*, 2005, no. 15, p. 30.

In the following years, *Polityka*'s authors highlighted recurrent problems related to high textbook prices,<sup>42</sup> ineffective education at every level, creating a large market for tutoring and various types of compilations,<sup>43</sup> the growing number of higher education institutions, where the quality of teaching often left a lot to be desired,<sup>44</sup> as well as the ever-present aggression at school. The latter problem became particularly important when Minister Roman Giertych announced his "Zero Tolerance for Violence at School" programme in 2006. Although *Polityka* did not deny the need to take radical steps to remedy the issues at hand, the minister's actions did not gain much support.<sup>45</sup> Criticism of Minister Giertych's actions was based, among other things, on the results of a study conducted by Professor Janusz Czapiński, who argued that increasing the restrictions had the opposite effect to the ministerial assumptions. While the general level of aggressive behaviours remained rather unchanged for years, after the introduction of radical solutions, a significant increase was noted in the level of aggression between teachers and students. After one year of implementation of the Zero Tolerance Programme (2006–2007) the number of teachers admitting to being provoked at school rose from 14% to 19%, admitting that students ignored their instructions – from 20% to 29%, and teachers forced by students to do their bidding grew from 3% to 5%. There was, of course, another side – during this year, the number of students admitting that they were victims of teacher violence rose from 6% to 8%, and the number of students claiming that the teacher used insults against them rose from 16% to 20%.<sup>46</sup>

2007 saw elections to the Polish Parliament that changed the balance of power in Poland. Katarzyna Hall was appointed the new Minister of National Education.<sup>47</sup> In 2008 she made an announcement in *Polityka*, saying:

<sup>42</sup> Idem, "Ala nie ma kasy", *Polityka*, 2006, no. 4, pp. 34–36.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, "Szkoła w osłej ławce", *Polityka*, 2004, no. 20, pp. 3–10; Idem, "Sąd Ostateczny niedrogo", *Polityka*, 2005, no. 10, pp. 94–96; Idem, "Matury tortury", *Polityka*, 2005, no. 20, pp. 24–26; SOWA, A., "Zakorkowani", *Polityka*, 2006, no. 10, pp. 40–42; MIKOŁAJEWSKA, B., "Pokolenie kopiuj-wklej", *Polityka*, 2010, no. 21, pp. 34–39; eadem, "Plaga plagiatów", *Polityka*, 2010, no. 43, pp. 38–43; CIEŚLA, J., "Ostatni rozdział", *Polityka*, 2012, no. 12, pp. 92–93.

<sup>44</sup> In one of his articles, Mariusz Czubaj quotes interesting data related to the number of higher education institutions – 112 in the academic year 1990/91, and just a decade later their number grew to 344. The number of privately-run schools also significantly increased from 6 in 1990 to 250 in 2000: CZUBAJ, M., "Studia wyższe: dziś promocja!", *Polityka*, 2005, no. 25, pp. 4–12. Cf.: WILK, E., "Przekrój gejzeru", *Polityka*, 2009, no. 26, pp. 16–18.

<sup>45</sup> Cf.: WINNICKA, E., "Wojna szkolna", *Polityka*, 2006, no. 22, pp. 6–13.

<sup>46</sup> "Rzecz o szczuciu. Z prof. Januszem Czapińskim o niespodziewanych konsekwencjach poczynań ministra edukacji Romana Giertycha w polskich szkołach i o tym, jak wybrnąć z tego bigosu – rozmawia Jacek Żakowski", *Polityka*, 2007, no. 10, pp. 6–12. *Polityka* also discussed ministerial assumptions and school reality in connection with the implementation of school uniforms, the idea of which was suggested by Minister Roman Giertych: SOCHA, R., "Kaźdemu po mundurku", *Polityka*, 2007, no. 15, pp. 90–93; ZAGNER, A., "Coś zwane mundurkiem", *Polityka*, 2007, no. 38, pp. 27–29.

<sup>47</sup> "Sylwetka nowej minister oraz jej droga zawodowa" [in:] SOCHA, R., "Pani poukładana", *Polityka*, 2007, no. 47, pp. 32–34.

We are working on a major curriculum reform to be implemented starting on the 1st of September 2009. We are lowering the school age to 6 years, which is supposed to promote equal educational opportunities. [...] In six months' time, the core curriculum of general education will be established for all 12 grades, until graduation from high school. It will be implemented over a six-year cycle, starting with the first year of primary school and from the first year of middle school. New curricula will be implemented successively.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, the rather revolutionary and controversial<sup>49</sup> core curriculum reform was almost completely concealed by the arguments regarding starting compulsory schooling from the age of six. Some articles offered positive assessments of the planned changes, including compulsory pre-school education, linking of successive stages of education via the curriculum, as well as the modified required reading list;<sup>50</sup> however, the issue of six-year-olds aroused the greatest interest among the authors. This, of course, was connected with a social protest movement led by Tomasz and Karolina Elbanowski. They also had the opportunity to present their views in *Polityka*, giving the readers an opportunity to learn the following:

We are not opposed to early childhood education – we are only concerned about the conditions of this education. Moving the tables and putting a carpet in a classroom is not enough to make it friendly.<sup>51</sup>

However, the ministerial concept regarding this issue also found some ardent supporters among the journalists of *Polityka*. For example, Jacek Żakowski stressed the demographic requirement to postpone compulsory schooling by one year – the students of the lowest year of a demographic decline were about to start their education, which would guarantee that all children would be enrolled in schools – both six- and seven-year-olds. Żakowski asserted that if that didn't happen, in a few years' time we would have problems with enrolment for university studies, followed by problems with the labour market.<sup>52</sup> The article also reads:

All the reforms, which turned out to be successful in Poland, were done haphazardly. We simply do not know any other way. This time, we simply cannot afford to give up the reform or even to

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<sup>48</sup> “Odmawiam majstrowania. Rozmowa z Katarzyną Hall, minister edukacji narodowej”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 5, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. discussion on the history core curriculum reform, which took place in *Wiadomości Historyczne*: OKŁA, G., “Ewolucja koncepcji edukacji historycznej – w kierunku efektywności kształcenia”, *Wiadomości Historyczne*, 2009, no. 3, pp. 16–19; CHOMICKI, G., “Rozmyślenia nad reformą, czyli poprawianie ideału”, *Wiadomości Historyczne*, 2009, no. 4, pp. 39–47; CHOIŃSKA-MIKA, J., “Rozważania nad reformą – kilka uwag polemicznych”, *Wiadomości Historyczne*, 2009, no. 5, pp. 32–35.

<sup>50</sup> WILK, E., “Dramat obowiązkowy”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 18, p. 22; PODGÓRSKA, J., “Cenzurka dla szkoły”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 25, pp. 33–37.

<sup>51</sup> “Szkoda dzieci. Rozmowa z Karoliną i Tomaszem Elbanowskimi, inicjatorami rodzicielskiego protestu przeciw postaniu sześciolatków do szkół”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 40, pp. 26–28.

<sup>52</sup> ŻAKOWSKI, J., “Sześć, siedem, pięć”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 39, pp. 16–18.

postpone it. If we do not do it, six-year-olds who are to go to school next year will pay dearly for this mistake – far more than for the shortcomings of the reform implemented in a hurry.<sup>53</sup>

However, the sheer scale of social resistance caused the final decision regarding starting compulsory schooling at a lower age to be postponed for the next few years, citing the insufficient preparation of schools or allowing parents to make voluntary decisions regarding the school readiness of their children (with the help of experts from psychological and pedagogical counselling centres.)<sup>54</sup>

In *Polityka*, the fundamental element of the reform – the so-called new core curriculum – was presented in detail only once – in Janina Podgórska's article on changes in the history core curriculum. It is worth noting, however, that the text was published only in 2012 – at the time when the first cohort of students taught in accordance with the new guidelines was about to finish middle school and start education in secondary schools. In her article, Janina Podgórska, criticises the protests of opponents of the new core curriculum and presented the most glaring flaws of the previous curriculum to the readers. She paid particular attention to the issue of repeating the whole history course three times at subsequent stages of education. This usually resulted in a fairly good knowledge of the ancient era, while recent history suffered, as it was always taught in the last months of education in the final grade, which for various reasons (exams, school trips, etc.) often prevented students from learning about these matters. The author believed the spiral arrangement of content and the introduction of coherent curricula in the third and fourth educational stages (middle school and secondary school) to be a chance to change this unfortunate state of affairs.<sup>55</sup> The new core curriculum was also intended to provide an alternative to the existing archaic education. The article reads:

The message that patriotism means dying for the homeland from the hands of the enemy and martyrdom, is strengthened by history classes conducted in the old style – by presenting facts according to the political and military significance. The educational message should be more in line with the modern world – it should provide tools that will enable students to better understand the surrounding reality and find their place in a multicultural community. History should not be treated as a closed narrative about “how it really used to be”, but rather as a source of the origins of contemporary phenomena, which can only help us achieve that goal.<sup>56</sup>

In the following years, the topic of education was not present to such a large extent in *Polityka*, although of course the issue of six-year-olds was constantly recurring (see foot-

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> CIEŚLA, J., “Ślad czarnej kredki”, *Polityka*, 2008, no. 42, pp. 34–35; WINNICKA, E., “Pani na dywanie”, *Polityka*, 2011, no. 12, pp. 30–31; BUNDA, M., CIEŚLA, J., PODGÓRSKA, J., WILK, E., “Rok z czterema niewiadomymi”, *Polityka*, 2012, no. 26, pp. 28–30; WILK, E., “Wojna sześćioletnia”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 17/18, pp. 34–35; CIEŚLA, J., “Maluchy się ratują”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 45, pp. 26–28; WILK, E., “Mama ma kota”, *Polityka*, 2014, no. 18, pp. 18–21.

<sup>55</sup> PODGÓRSKA, J., “Histeria”, *Polityka*, 2012, no. 14, pp. 34–37.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 37.

note 54). The presence of religion at school, its costs, the number of hours of catechesis at school and plans to introduce a *matura* exam in religion were also increasingly criticised.<sup>57</sup> Jacek Żakowski, one from the more popular journalists publishing in *Polityka* criticised the overload of curriculum with content that was too detailed or completely unnecessary:

[...] when the school as we know it was established, humanity did not know vaccines, electrons, chromosomes, two world wars, several revolutions, all Nobel Prize-winning novels, the theory of relativity, radio, television, mass culture, not to mention the Internet. For a century and a half, all of this was chaotically and haphazardly added to the curriculum, adding years, hours of and inconsistent requirements regarding knowledge.<sup>58</sup>

Gradually, a discussion about the future of middle schools began to take a shape. In 2013, Professor Bogusław Śliwerski, commented on the statements of politicians of various options, among whom he mentioned the names of former heads of the Ministry of Education – Krystyna Łybacka, Roman Giertych and Ryszard Legutko – clearly stated that the liquidation of middle schools would not constitute anything more than another political happening. One of their most glaring disadvantages is the fact that they are the only variant of this type of school, which is unique in the entire European Union. In addition to general education, also technical and vocational education should also function in parallel, in order to enable students with lower aspirations or intellectual capabilities to enjoy a comfortable education process. As a recognised teacher, Śliwerski postulated supplementing the educational structure in Poland with first-degree secondary schools with oriented towards technical and vocational education.<sup>59</sup>

In 2015, the year of elections, the topic of liquidation of middle schools returned, among others, as an element of the Law and Justice political platform. Marcin Kołodziejczyk raised this issue in *Polityka* in his article titled “Czas postrzyżyn”, quoting the results of a study conducted in 2013 by the Homo Homini Research Institute, showing that 60% of Poles wanted to get rid of middle schools, and almost 50% said that they offered bad education.<sup>60</sup> The arguments of opponents of middle schools included overloaded curricula, the difficult age of youth attending middle schools and selection, which replaced equal opportunities. Despite that, Kołodziejczyk stressed that the 1999 reform was still an unfinished business, as evidenced – among other things – by middle schools located in the same buildings as primary schools.<sup>61</sup>

On the eve of the election, the readers of *Polityka* could learn more about Law and Justice party’s platform regarding postulated changes in the education system, including compulsory schooling from the age of seven, liquidation of middle schools, bachelor’s

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<sup>57</sup> Cf.: PODGÓRSKA, J., “Tańce z maturą”, *Polityka*, 2012, no. 48, pp. 14–15; eadem, “Bo większość chodzi”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 36, pp. 8–10; eadem, “Kateschiza”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 37, pp. 25–27.

<sup>58</sup> ŻAKOWSKI, J., “Odkuwanie głów”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 20, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> ŚLIWERSKI, B., “Precz z gimnazjami?”, *Polityka*, 2013, no. 35, pp. 32–33.

<sup>60</sup> KOŁODZIEJCZYK, M., “Czas postrzyżyn”, *Polityka*, 2015, no. 13, p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, pp. 32–34.

degrees and the test form of exams. However, Ewa Wilk, who conducted this analysis, argued that the opinion about middle schools which are said to be breeding grounds for violence and aggression is nothing but a long-lived stereotype. The author also postulated:

[...] What Polish education needs the most is a moment of peace and some time to heal wounds after what happened in the past. Sure, not everything is fine about it and there are several problems that we should try to solve together. [...] It is worth doing all of this. Without the counter-revolution proposed by the Law and Justice party. And I call it counter-revolution, because the education system proposed by this party is disturbingly similar to the one we know from the Polish People's Republic, with the exception, of course, of the opposite ideological goal.<sup>62</sup>

The information about the stereotypical perception of middle schools as breeding ground for aggression and violence may be surprising in the context of numerous articles devoted to this issue in *Polityka* itself (see footnote 27). It is worth noting, however, that subsequent texts referred to the findings and conclusions of experts (including from the Educational Research Institute) proving that higher levels of aggressive behaviours were at that point observed in higher grades of primary schools, rather than in middle and high schools.<sup>63</sup>

After the Law and Justice party won the elections and officially announced the planned changes, *Polityka* published many articles addressing the negative aspects of the functioning of middle schools in an objective manner, while warning against the reform pushed by the ruling party. Among others, Ewa Wilk, who introduced the readers to its main assumptions, informed about the first signs of opposition movements forming in social media,<sup>64</sup> while former minister Katarzyna Hall, sharply criticised the amendment to the Act on the Education System, which was enacted in the last days of December 2015, abolishing the pre-school obligation for 5-year-olds and introducing compulsory schooling from the age of 7.<sup>65</sup> Minister Hall wrote:

In recent years, the issue of six-year-old children case has been politicised all the time. Now, for political reasons, the education system has been brought back to the days of old, without looking for substantive arguments pertaining to children's development needs, or consulting the changes with experts.<sup>66</sup>

Dr Małgorzata Wójcik, a psychologist, also contributed some valuable comments to the argument regarding the sensibility of liquidating middle schools. In one of the first is-

<sup>62</sup> WILK, E., "Klucz do szkoły", *Polityka*, 2015, no. 36, p. 23.

<sup>63</sup> Cf.: CIEŚLA, J., "Zabawy szkołą", *Polityka*, 2016, no. 28, pp. 19–21; eadem, BENDYK, E., "Co dalej z edukacją?", *Polityka*, 2017, no. 10, pp. 26–29.

<sup>64</sup> WILK, E., "Dostaniemy dobrą szkołę", *Polityka*, 2015, no. 47, pp. 26–28.

<sup>65</sup> HALL, K., "Cofanie w rozwoju", *Polityka*, 2016, no. 4, pp. 28–30. One of articles written by Joanna Cieśła in that period features an information that the Act on the Education System of 1991 was amended more than 70 times in 25 years, which means three times a year on average: CIEŚLA, J., "Rok przed wyrokiem", *Polityka*, 2016, no. 36, pp. 14–16.

<sup>66</sup> HALL, K., "Cofanie w rozwoju...", p. 30.

sues of *Polityka* in 2016, she argued that the split into primary and middle schools is fully justified due to the children's developmental cycle. Middle school serves as an important point on this road to adulthood, giving the child a chance to get rid of their existing label and take on a new social role. According to Dr Wójcik, the liquidation of middle schools would not eliminate problems associated with them, while creating a real risk that they will return to the primary school, perhaps on an even larger scale than in the past.<sup>67</sup>

However, all arguments concerning the fate of Polish education were cut off immediately after the end of the school year 2015/2016, when Minister Anna Zalewska announced a draft reform of the education system in Toruń. Joanna Cieśla, the author of the article "Zabawy szkołą" summed up the choice of the place (the campaign in support for middle schools was launched in Toruń) and the date (the beginning of summer break guaranteeing peace in teachers' lounges), not without a valid reason, as an *arrogant gesture towards teachers, local government officials, parents and students themselves*.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the general characteristics of the implemented changes – 8-grade primary school, 4-year high school and 5-year technical school or two-stage vocational school, Minister Zalewska emphasised the need for the reform, referring to the results of the national debate (50 at the seat of the Ministry of National Education, 17 in voivodeships and over 200 across the whole country).<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, after the Minister's speech, there were many uncertainties and even more reservations, to which the authors publishing in *Polityka* also returned in subsequent issues. They wrote about the disadvantaged students of the future 8th grade, who, first of all, would find themselves in the very middle of the four-year education cycle – learning some subjects from the middle, and second, when enrolling in secondary school, they will compete against much better-prepared middle school graduates, as a second cohort in the same year. At the same time, they will lose a year of foreign language education. The chaos surrounding the planning and creation of a new network of schools by local authorities and the issue of efficiency and engagement of teachers, who would now have to work in several schools to collect enough working hours was also criticised. The first presented core curriculum was also assessed negatively as too bloated, but at the same time devoid of links between the issues discussed within and between particular subjects.<sup>70</sup>

As far as the liquidated middle schools are concerned, it is worth listening to Prof. Mikołaj Herbst, who stated:

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<sup>67</sup> "Królowie i ofiary. Z dr Małgorzatą Wójcik, psycholożką, badaczką zachowań nastolatków, o przemocy rówieśniczej, o tym, dlaczego nie warto likwidować gimnazjów oraz co powinni wiedzieć rodzice, gdy dziecko domaga się markowych butów", *Polityka*, 2016, no. 6, pp. 32–34.

<sup>68</sup> CIEŚLA, J., "Zabawy szkołą...", p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, pp. 19–21.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem; eadem, "Bunt szkół", *Polityka*, 2017, no. 4, pp. 24–26; eadem, BENDYK, E., "Co dalej...", pp. 26–29; ZDANOWICZ, K., "Szkoła przetrwania", *Polityka*, 2017, no. 25, pp. 12–15; "Po dzwonku. Rozmowa z prof. Stanisławem Dylakiem o dobrej szkole, do której nam coraz dalej, o polskiej szkole systemowego deformowania oraz o szkole marzeń", *Polityka*, 2017, no. 36, pp. 26–28; CIEŚLA, J., "Trudna lekcja", *Polityka*, 2017, no. 36, pp. 29–31.

[...] by liquidating middle schools, the ministry decides to shorten the time of general education by a year, common to the whole cohort of students. It is probably the only case of a reform restricting access to education in the civilised world.<sup>71</sup>

These words are significant. The introduction of the so-called “good change” to the Polish school was treated rather as an oxymoron in the *Polityka* weekly. Contrary to what was announced by the ministers, thousands of teachers lost their jobs or do not have enough working hours for a full-time post. Despite a very small scale (about 30%), resulting from the lack of unity among teachers, their strikes and protests led to visits and audits of school district inspectors in numerous schools. Media, including *Polityka* reported on disciplinary proceedings against teachers who did not fit into the current image of the school – the cases of teachers who took part in the so-called black protest in Zabrze, or the teacher from Żagań, who posted an episode of *The Chairman’s Ear* to his Facebook timeline.<sup>72</sup>

Is this really a good change? We will only be able to answer this question in a few years’ time. Unless, in the meantime, we will see yet another reform...

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<sup>72</sup> CIEŚLA, J., “Szkola niskich nalotów”, *Polityka*, 2017, no. 16, pp. 26–28; ZDANOWICZ, K., “Szkola przetrwania...”, pp. 12–15.

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