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Teacher Education in Poland: Contested Terrains Between Policy and Practice

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Introduction

Teacher education in Poland has been (and still is) subject to the great interest of policymakers and politicians, seeking to infiltrate the curricula in order to mould teachers into advocates of their politics and ideologies among students, that is, future citizens. This influence was particularly intense during the Soviet period (up to the 1990s) when the communist party turned special attention to teacher education, in order to establish total control over the education system and society as a whole (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 2015). However, paradoxically given the supposed trajectory towards ‘freedom’ post-communism, 30 years later, the situation seems to remain quite similar: indeed, post-1990s governments, under the umbrella of ‘democratisation’, have established a strong grip on teacher education through a combination of the professional standards and competences demanded of all teachers, namely in that they are expected to prepare students to live and work in a global market economy. As Gawlicz and Starnawski (2018, p. 387), argue:

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[t]he sphere of education can be perceived simultaneously as an object and as a vehicle of change: a field to be adjusted to fit post-transition realities (requirements of neoliberal policies, dynamics of public sphere, integration with European Union (EU) structures, etc.) as well as a promoter of societies' readiness for their self-conversion: casting off the 'old' and taking up 'new' assumptions of what is proper, rational, and desirable in the collective, individual, public, and private lives of a country's population.

Although this entanglement of teacher education in politics is typical for many countries across the world (Biesta et al. 2020), in Poland these already contested terrains are further destabilised by the myth of the so-called balance between school autonomy and government control (Osiecka-Chojnacka 2010). Indeed, using Simkins' (1997 cited in Higham and Earley 2013, p. 704) terminology, while the operational power (i.e. 'how' the service is to be provided and resourced) has been increasingly transferred into the hands of school leaders in recent years, the criteria power (i.e. aims and purposes of the service) has been drawn much more firmly into central government, thus away from teachers themselves.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the major shifts in teacher education policies and practices in Poland over the last three decades and, based on this analysis, to provide recommendations for the further development of teacher education in this country, and perhaps beyond. The chapter begins by outlining the major socio-educational transformations in Poland after the fall of communism. In light of these changes, the legal, organisational, and institutional reconstructions in the field are overviewed, followed by a discussion of the tensions, challenges, and paradoxes that have accompanied them. The paper concludes with some potential trajectories and key insights into the changes needed in order to locate students and their teachers at the heart of future education policy reforms.

Shifting Sands: Poland's Socio-educational Landscape over the Past 30 Years

The development of education in Poland after regaining full independence from communist control in 1989 mirrors the country's wider socio-economic landscape, closely following the timeline of major political transformations. Before 1989, the dominating party had full control over all education institutions, including those that educated prospective teachers. The deepening economic crisis in Poland—combined with empty communist promises of

increased living standards, wealth, and social benefits for everyone, such as healthcare and housing—contributed to the growing frustration and irritation felt among many Poles, thus rousing the desire for change among them (Giza-Poleszczuk et al. 2000). The post-independence process of change in the education system was initiated, as in other areas of social life, from the Polish Round Table Talks, that is the negotiations between the then communist government and the opposition. During these talks, different stakeholders worked in small groups to discuss social and political issues such as environmental protection, mining, youth, science, education, and technological progress, among others.

Following the fruitful outcomes of these roundtable talks, the Polish education system underwent two main reform strategies between 1989 and 1991: bottom-up and top-down. The bottom-up reforms were the result of pedagogical innovation from individual teachers, researchers, social activists, parents, and associations. This type of reform consisted of introducing alternative education solutions to the school system (e.g. teachers creating their own programmes based on the principles of, for instance, Waldorf's pedagogy). On the other hand, top-down reforms were initiated by the first Minister of Education in the Third Republic of Poland, Henryk Samsonowicz, including key reforms aimed at the gradual delegating of school affairs to local authorities (Śliwerski 1999). While the goal of these reforms was commendable, achieving them in practice was laborious and lengthy due to the necessity of 'adapting the centralised and monopolised education system of the [...] socialist state to the requirements of the emerging parliamentary democracy' (Majewski 1996, p. 198). As such, enacting the reforms required: (1) the development of new education law in line with democratic principles; (2) movement away from a centralised (governmental) formulation of education policies, plans, and curricula; (3) the development of new school curricula without political indoctrination (4) an increase in public financial investment in the sector; and (5) changes in the existing staff working in schools (including leadership staff). This process of adaptation concluded with the Polish parliament passing the new *Act on the Education System of 7 September 1991*. The act contained a number of provisions indicating the opening of Polish education law to the political rules governing in other democratic countries, including: (1) founding education on universal values, including Polish cultural traditions; (2) recognising the co-responsibility of the state and local governments for financing, organising, and supervising education; (3) recognising the supportive role of the family in educating children and young people, plus the right of parents to have a say in the material delivered in schools; (4) granting all citizens the right to participate in educational initiatives; (5)

increasing the role of school headteachers, pedagogical councils, and social bodies in school management (e.g. via student governments, parents' councils, and school councils); and (6) linking education law with legal acts in other fields (Majewski 1996, p. 198).

Although not all the above objectives were fully realised, a major achievement during this period was the abolition of the state's monopoly in the running and management of schools. In practice, this means that since then schools have been run by state administration units, local governments, or social or religious organisations (Majewski 1996, pp. 202–203). In addition, this is the point when Poland's teachers were given full autonomy over the development and selection of curricula, textbooks, and teaching resources (Szyszka 2010).

However, the most significant changes in the education system came a few years later, in 1999, when the new Ministry of National Education reform came into force (Act of 25 July 1998 amending the School Education Act, *Journal of Laws 1998*, No. 117, item 759; No. 162, item 1126). This reform aimed to improve the quality of education offered in school, as well as equalise educational opportunities and, consequently, to increase the schooling rate at secondary and higher levels. The major changes introduced covered the following areas: (1) the structure of the school system (i.e. implementing 6-year primary school, 3-year lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*), and 3-year upper secondary school cycles, plus vocational schools); (2) the principles of educational institution management and financing (e.g. merging schools with high per-pupil costs); (3) curricula (i.e. in terms of education goals, the tasks of the school, and the content of syllabi); and (4) the examination system (i.e. introducing an external system of examinations at the end of each stage of education, carried out by central and district examination commissions) (Zahorska 2009; Wiśniewski and Zahorska 2020).

During this time of profound change, attention was also paid to improving the quality of teaching, teacher education, and teacher professional development. In 2000, a four-level system of teachers' career progression was introduced (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak 2021). Pursuant to this system, entrants to the profession began as trainee teachers (the first grade) and undertook a probationary period lasting one school year, before being promoted to the rank of a contracted teacher (the second grade). Then, teachers could become an appointed teacher (the third grade) and, beyond that, a certified teacher (the fourth grade). This system was intended as a motivational mechanism that would encourage teachers to invest in their professional development (Wiłkomirska 2005; Wiłkomirska and Zielińska 2013) and—as a consequence—to improve the quality of their work, as well as guarantee

employment stability for appointed and certified teachers. Progressing through the professional positions was also linked to a pay rise: a certified teacher was guaranteed a rate amounting to 225% of the trainee teacher's salary (Zahorska 2009). However, on 1 September 2022 the Ministry of Education and Science changed this career progression system once more, reducing the number of stages to only two: i.e. appointed teacher and certified teacher. The outcomes of this later reform are yet to play out.

The results of the significant 1999 reform are held in mixed regard by scholars, students, parents, and representatives of local school authorities (Putkiewicz et al. 1999; Konarzewski 2004; Wiśniewski and Zahorska 2020). On the one hand, this reform led to an increase in the numbers of students continuing their education at secondary and tertiary levels, as well as an improvement in PISA scores. On the other hand, this reform was to some extent an '[i]mitation [...] of educational policy models developed originally in the West' (Gawlicz and Starnawski 2018, p. 387), meaning that they were not designed with the Central and Eastern European (or Polish) context in mind. Furthermore, all of these transformations were implemented in a great hurry, without taking into account research knowledge and teachers' voices, an omission which negatively affected the quality of the new curricula and textbooks, and led to miscalculation of teachers' salaries, as well as the bureaucratisation of the teacher professional development model.

In 2017, after the victory of the right-wing nationalist, conservative political Law and Justice Party in the parliamentary elections, another radical reform of the Polish education system took place (Dorczak 2019). This reform was preceded by a short public consultation with various education stakeholders on the planned directions of changes in education policy and the objectives of the reformation processes. The fundamental change resulting from this reform is the new (and current) structure of the school system, that is primary school has been extended to last eight years; lower secondary school has been abolished; general secondary school has been extended to four years; vocational secondary school has been extended to five years; and first-degree (three-year) and second-degree (two-year) sectoral vocational schools have been established. Exams have been introduced at the end of primary school: in Polish, a foreign language, mathematics, as well as one chosen subject. The results from these exams then form the basis for the pupil's success in applying to their chosen secondary school. A new core curriculum, plus new textbooks and teaching resources for each subject, are gradually being introduced in all types of schools, based on the ruling party's publicised values, including, for example, 'self-sacrifice', 'cooperation', 'solidarity', 'altruism', 'patriotism', and 'respect for tradition'.

The results of this reform, as was the case with the 1999 reform, are highly controversial and politically driven—resulting in a wave of protests—and only pretend to enter into cooperation with teachers, trade unions, or other education stakeholders (Dorczak 2019). In real terms, the abolition of the *gimnazjum* led directly to many teachers losing their jobs. In addition, this reform further highlighted the existing gap between education policy and practice in Poland, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. In fact, reform projects over the last three decades have been constructed in a top-down manner and were to be implemented by teachers who were neither their co-creators nor sufficiently prepared for their implementation (Gajdzica 2006, 2013). Indeed, as Śliwerski (2013, p. 305) notes, education at this time was:

treated as a POLITICAL GOOD, not a GENERAL GOOD. From 1992 onwards, politicians who successively took power in the Ministry of National Education appropriated Polish education to achieve particular political goals of the party or coalition that brought them to power [...] education turned out to be a bargaining chip for political party and trade union battles.

As such, these political influences were also highly evident in the transformation of the teacher education field, as further discussed in the subsequent section.

Initial Teacher Education in Post-1989 Poland: Towards Increasing Standardisation and Accountability

As with the other elements of the education system described above, reforming teacher education after 1989 was not an easy task—largely due to the stubborn remnants of the communist system, which had led to the complete subordination of teachers to the ruling party and state under the regime. Firstly, the communist regime gradually reduced the research-based, academic model of teacher training to a narrowly focused, craft knowledge-based education. Secondly, a formal legacy of communism in Poland is the 1982 Teachers' Charter (Act of 26 January 1982—Karta Nauczyciela [The Teacher Charter with further amendments]), the first education law passed by the government after the introduction of martial law. Although this document has since been subject to numerous—and more or less extensive—amendments, it is still in force today, defining who can become a teacher and setting out the

rules for this professional group. Thirdly, communism led to a regression in the level of teachers' qualifications: there was no long-term school staff policy under the regime. Between 1976 and 1980 Poland had a glut of teachers, to which the government responded by introducing enrolment quotas for teacher education studies in order to prevent unemployment in the sector. However, paradoxically, this measure created a serious national teacher shortage. At this time, teachers were trained in two-year post-secondary courses, but it was not uncommon for people without a high school diploma or any teaching qualifications to work in a school. Ultimately, these remnants of the communist system influenced the direction of post-1989 reforms in Poland's teacher education system (Majewski 1996).

To address the above disadvantages, upon regaining full independence Poland's Ministry of Education drew up an ambitious programme to ensure that all teachers would have a university degree by 1998. Subsequently, an enormous number of teachers enrolled to complete their qualifications and obtain the newly required master's degree; however, the country's universities and teacher training colleges were unable to meet this sudden increase in demand, therefore private universities offering pedagogical courses for teachers filled the deficit (Majewski 1996). Since the early 1990s, teacher education in Poland has taken place across a variety of higher education institutions, namely: universities, higher pedagogical schools, and teacher training colleges (Bogaj et al. 1994). Since 1992, the latter two have been operating under the supervision of universities, enabling teachers to continue their education up to a master's degree. The three-year college programme was tailored to student teachers and teachers working in kindergartens, primary schools, and other educational institutions, resulting in a bachelor's degree awarded by the university with which the college had signed a cooperation agreement (Jung-Miklaszewska 2003; Kautz 2011).

Since 1990, the Minister of Higher Education has defined, by regulation, the guidelines universities must meet in order to establish and operate courses of study, as well as the standards for initial teacher training. From this point onwards, both the Act on Higher Education and the standards for teacher education were amended four times. The first education law in post-communist Poland (passed on the 12 September 1990, article 4a.) defined teacher education standards in terms of: (1) the profile of the graduate; (2) the subjects included in pedagogical education; (3) the preparation of the graduate in two specialities, ICT technology, and a foreign language; (4) the duration and type of internships; and (5) curriculum content and required skills (Act of 12 September 1990 on Higher Education (Journal of Laws No. 65, item 385, as amended).

However, these standards for teacher education announced in 1990 were not enacted until 2003 (MENiS 2003, *Journal of Laws 2003* No. 170, item 1655) due to consecutive Polish governments failing to make education a consistent priority. In line with these standards, higher education institutions could educate teachers within the frameworks of higher vocational studies, master's studies, and postgraduate studies. Across all three, preparation for the teaching profession included the following interlinked aspects: (1) subject education, that is, for conducting educational activities in a specific subject area; (2) teacher training (330 hours), that is, for carrying out general teaching and caring tasks; and (3) pedagogical practice (at least 150 hours), that is, developing professional skills, plus understanding the organisation of schools and institutions (MENiS 2003, *Journal of Laws 2003* No. 170, item 1655).

One year later, in 2004, new standards for teacher education were defined (MENiS 2004, *Journal of Laws 2004* No. 207, item 2110), allowing teachers to train to teach two subjects rather than one—for example, kindergarten and elementary education, with an additional specialisation in a foreign language. In this case, teacher education for the first subject was realised in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the teaching standards for that particular field. Teacher education for the second subject was implemented within the scope of preparing teachers in accordance with the core curriculum of pre-school or general education, as appropriate (i.e. at least 400 hours). Beyond this, the condensed, part-time training of teachers could also take place via evening and extramural sessions—respectively covering at least 80% and 60% of the number of full-time classes, while maintaining the curriculum content.

Further amendments to the standards of initial teacher education were made in 2012 and 2019 respectively. The 2012 standards (MNiSW 2012, *Journal of Laws 2012*, item 131) included:

1. a description of educational outcomes, in terms of:
 - (a) substantive and methodological knowledge,
 - (b) pedagogical and psychological knowledge, including preparation for working with students who have special educational needs,
 - (c) use of technologies,
 - (d) knowledge of a foreign language;
2. a description of the organisation of the teaching process;
3. a description of teaching modules (along with a description of the educational content of individual subjects, including internships);
4. a description of the organisation of internships.

Notably, these 2012 standards use the language of ‘learning outcomes’ (i.e. defined as the level of knowledge, skills, and competences of a graduate), ECTS points, and the division of studies into first-cycle, second-cycle, and long-cycle programmes. This framing proves the strong influence of the Bologna system on the teacher education system in Poland, in particular the linking of learning outcomes with the integrated qualification system for any given level of education (i.e. the Bologna ISCED 6 and 7). Preparation for teaching in kindergartens and elementary schools was covered by first-cycle studies in pedagogy (or other studies preparing teachers to work in elementary education). Substantive preparation for subject-specific teaching in elementary schools, lower secondary schools, upper secondary schools, and vocational schools was covered by second-cycle and long-cycle master’s studies in the field of study appropriate for the taught subject.

The 2019 Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW 2019, *Journal of Laws 2019*, item 1450) contains three annexes specifying the standards for the teaching profession, covering: teachers; pre-school and elementary school teachers; and special education teachers, speech therapists, and support teachers. Consequently, the qualifications for pre-school, elementary, and special education teaching can only be acquired via long-cycle, five-year master’s programmes.

On an organisational level, the 2019 standards specify that teacher education includes content preparation and pedagogical preparation—in particular, the organisation of the learning process (e.g. minimum number of class hours, groups of subjects in which specific learning outcomes are achieved, and number of European Credit Transfer System points (ECTS) and both general and specific learning outcomes (i.e. the scope of knowledge, skills, and social competences of the graduate), as well as their verification. The standards also clarify the requirements for internships (e.g. the internship should be closely linked to the course of study for the subject); the infrastructure (e.g. schools and other institutions where internships are undertaken should enable the full achievement of the expected learning outcomes); and staff necessary for conducting the teaching process (e.g. academic teachers should have practical and/or research experience in the field relevant to their courses). Teacher education can only be provided by an institution that is authorised to award a doctoral degree in the discipline to which the field of study is assigned (Act of 3 July 2018—Provisions introducing the Law on Higher Education and Science, *Journal of Laws 2018*, item 1669, article 206. 1)—as such providing an opportunity to closely link contemporary teacher education with scientific research.

A teaching qualification—according to the 2019 standards—may also be obtained via postgraduate studies, with the exception of pre-school and elementary school education. The standards clearly specify that postgraduate studies should be of a duration not less than three semesters and allow the candidate to achieve the same learning outcomes as in the full study programme. Furthermore, preparation for the teaching profession provided as part of a postgraduate teaching programme should be carried out by staff enrolled in training teachers in universities at bachelor's or master's level.

Despite the numerous pathways towards entering the teaching profession, the most widespread model of initial teacher education is still the concurrent model. In this model, the pedagogical preparation component is provided from the beginning of the teacher's studies, together with general education and/or education in their taught subject area/s.

All teachers in Poland are required to have preparation in a given subject (e.g. biology and mathematics) and pedagogical training (i.e. teaching methods, psychology, and pedagogy) (*Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of 1 August 2017 on the specific qualifications required from teachers*) (*Journal of Laws 2020*, item 1289). However, these qualifications differ depending on the type of school where the teacher will be employed. Teachers employed in pre-primary and primary schools are required to have, as a minimum qualification, a bachelor's degree, whereas teachers employed in lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools (as well as basic vocational schools) are required to hold a minimum of a master's degree or equivalent. Since 2018, all candidates who would like to work as pre-school or elementary school teachers have needed to complete a five-year, long-cycle master's programme.

The right to work as a teacher in Poland involves the recognition of professional qualifications—and people who have appropriate teaching qualifications and experience acquired in the EU member states may also apply for recognition of their qualifications in Polish education settings (Dwojewski 2015). Pursuant to the *Teachers' Charter*, a person may work as a teacher if:

- they have completed a course of higher education which includes the appropriate pedagogical preparation, or they have completed education at a teacher training centre;
- they observe basic moral principles;
- they possess the good health required for the profession.

In addition, employment contracts for teachers are generally offered if the school is able to employ them full-time for an indefinite period of time, and if the person:

1. has Polish citizenship (this does not apply to citizens of the European Union, the Swiss Confederation, or a member state of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA)—all three of which are party to the European Economic Area);
2. has a full legal capacity to act and enjoys civil rights;
3. is not subject to an ongoing criminal proceeding in a case concerning an intentional indictable offence or a disciplinary proceeding;
4. has not been convicted with a valid court decision for an intentional offence or an intentional tax offence
(4a) has not been subject to a valid disciplinary punishment in the 3 years before the beginning of the employment contract;
5. has the qualifications necessary for the position.

Continuing Professional Development: A Story on the Margins of the Career Progression System

The continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers in the Polish context most commonly refers to the career progression system (Wilkomirska and Zielińska 2013; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak 2021). Since September 2018, all teachers in Poland have had a statutory obligation to undertake professional development—in accordance with the needs of their school, and with the goal of improving the knowledge and skills connected with their performed work (Act of January 26th 1982—Karta Nauczyciela [The Teachers' Charter with further amendments, Journal of Laws of 2019, item 2215 and of 2021, item 4). However, although up until this point in-service training had not been compulsory, nonetheless teachers were obliged to expand their knowledge and skills. The need for professional development had been set out by key education regulations and documents, for example, the Teachers' Charter mentions several times that the teacher should pursue their full personal development in accordance with their school's needs. Furthermore, professional development is also an important element in evaluating a teacher's work and achieving the successive stages of their career progression.

In-service training in Poland is provided along two paths, namely: complementary education (that enables teachers to obtain higher or additional

qualifications) and staff development (that allows teachers to develop or improve their subject knowledge and skills) (Madalińska-Michalak 2017, p. 90). The network of staff development in Poland is relatively well developed and covers the following (Norkowska 2018):

1. the activity of in-service training institutions for teachers:
 - central/national institutions
 - regional institutions
 - local institutions
 - non-public in-service training institutions;
2. methodological consultancy
 - assistance to teachers in planning
 - organising and testing the effects of the teaching and educational process
 - developing, choosing, and adapting the curriculum;
3. school-based training aimed at the shared learning process of the teaching staff in areas significant for the school/institution;
4. self-educational activities not highlighted in legal regulations, including:
 - reading professional literature, such as journals
 - using profession-specific websites
 - watching educational programmes
 - attending exhibitions
 - exchanging knowledge and experiences with peers
 - collaborating with universities, educational institutions, employers, and so on.

The national institution supporting teachers' professional development in Poland is the Centre of Education Development (Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji). It offers teachers from all across the country opportunities to participate in seminars and conferences, which may be organised in cooperation with foreign institutions. At regional and local levels, the Regional Centres of Teaching Methodology, as well as smaller public and non-public institutions, offer teachers a wide range of courses, trainings, and seminars (Madalińska-Michalak 2017). At the last count (September 2016), there were 425 active in-service teacher training institutions in Poland.

Legal regulations also specify the level of expenditure for complementary education and staff development. According to the Teachers' Charter, the budgets of school governing bodies should include funds for subsidising in-service teacher training, including professional courses to the value of 0.8% of the annual funds allocated for teachers' personal remunerations (Act of January 26th 1982—Karta Nauczyciela [The Teachers' Charter with further amendments], *Journal of Laws of 2019*, item 2215). Additionally, a separate regulation specifies the forms of teachers' professional development and the kinds of connected expenditures which can be financed with these resources, as well as detailed criteria for the granting of these funds (MEN 2019).

Although much attention has been given to the restructuring of and investment in in-service training for teachers in Poland over the past three decades, surprisingly, there is a lack of studies on teachers' own experiences of professional development. While the available studies mainly refer to teachers' measurable career progression, less attention has been given to their first-hand perception and experience of in-service training, as well as its impact on their practice (Kowalczuk-Wałędziak 2021). Broadly speaking, existing research shows that Polish teachers declare a readiness to take part in various forms of professional development, such as courses, workshops, seminars, conferences, or doing research (Wiłkomirska and Zielińska 2013; OECD 2014; Wiłkomirska 2017), but that they assess this impact on their everyday practice as modest (Fazlagić 2012). Furthermore, some scholars point out that teacher professional development culture in Poland is mainly driven by the bureaucratic trappings of the official career progression trajectory (e.g. Wiłkomirska and Zielińska 2013; Fazlagić and Erkol 2015). This means that teachers participate in professional development activities not so much out of an internal feeling or sense of need, but rather to fulfil the statutory requirements for their career progression. However, as highlighted by Fazlagić and Erkol (2015, p. 545), '[t]he real problem is that the formal criteria are not a measure of genuine professionalism', meaning that '[t]he criteria which a teacher must meet to be promoted are overly focused on meeting bureaucratic standards'—ultimately at the expense of developing truly independent and critically thinking teachers (Kowalczuk-Wałędziak 2021, pp. 61–62).

Tensions, Challenges, and Paradoxes in Reforming Teacher Education over the Last Three Decades

The post-1989 education landscape in Poland was characterised by the search for a model of teacher education adequate for meeting the new challenges of a democratic society recovering from a dictatorial regime (Rutkowiak 1986; Kwiatkowska 1988; Lewowicki 1990; Gołębiak 1998; Mizerek 1999, 2000). As the country re-established its own mechanisms of education, the need to depart from instrumental education focused on fluency in controlling the educational process or shaping teachers' qualities and skills was stressed. Instead, the need for a thorough theoretical, methodological, and axiological education was emphasised, within which teachers' knowledge and values were considered as a necessary condition for their proper functioning. A lively discussion on teacher education has continued into the twenty-first century (e.g. Kwieciński 2000; Palka 2003; Wiłkomirska 2005; Lewowicki 2007; Kwiatkowska 2008; Szempruch 2013). However, the adoption of successive legal guidelines and standards in the field has slowed down the processes of reflecting critically and searching for a concept of teacher education that truly meets the requirements of the contemporary, changing, and uncertain world we live in—creating tensions, challenges, and paradoxes in Poland's teacher education reform, as will be explored below.

The state of teacher education in Poland today is shaped by the standards envisioned by those in government, specifically as recommended by the minister responsible for higher education. This top-down approach indicates, on the one hand, the governments' desire to improve the quality of teacher education, but, on the other hand, the limited autonomy of universities in the creation of educational concepts and the implementation of the teacher education process—thus suggesting that the contemporary authorities aspire to control the field of education themselves (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2012, 2013). In this vein, it is critical to note the dramatic increase in attention paid to the organisation of the education sector (including the specifics of learning outcomes) by the Polish government over the last two decades. Government standards presently stipulate the guidelines for teacher education in great detail—having devoted just four pages to these concerns in 2003, this rose to nine in 2004, 22 in 2012, and 129 in 2019. Along a similar trajectory, the number of learning outcomes named by the government numbered 14 in 2003, 28 in 2004, 49 in 2012, and 1137 in 2019 (Atroszko 2020). This ever-increasing detail and accelerating complexity of standards makes it difficult to

develop study programmes that meaningfully include all of the demanded elements in practice (Krause 2015; Szyling 2016). Indeed, standards have become a simplistic tool with which to measure the quality of education for future teachers, rather than facilitate an in-depth and nuanced approach to gauge and improve the quality of study programmes. This discrepancy is also the case in many other countries, where ‘teacher education has been caught up in the same logic of measurement, competition, and control’ (Biesta et al. 2020, p. 455). This signals the need to urgently re-think what exactly we mean by ‘teacher education quality’ beyond our national boundaries—is it a neoliberal measure of passes and fails, or a reflection of humanistic values such as passion, empathy, and collaboration?

As was mentioned above, preparation for the teaching profession in Poland today, as stipulated in the current government-issued standards (2019), includes both substantive preparation and pedagogical preparation. The latter consists of firstly, psychological and pedagogical preparation, and, secondly, didactic preparation (which, in turn, consists of: the fundamentals of didactics, vocal training, and didactic preparation for teaching a subject). Yet, while these standards place much emphasis on the teacher’s practical and methodological skills, they lack the philosophical, historical, and theoretical context of the broader educational concept being implemented. As such, it is worth considering what implications this isolation has for the development of future teachers. Indeed, such a rigid conceptualisation of teacher education is far from that of the reflective practitioner well-equipped and ready to handle the fundamental multi-dimensionality and fluidity of the profession. Reducing the highly nuanced nature of the education process to repetitive, methodologically ‘correct’ activities may give rise to a false sense of ease among students seeking to enter the profession, rooted in an unwarranted conviction that a one-dimensional, step-by-step approach to teaching is sufficient—whereby undertaking studies simply provides a pre-made package of reliable ways of acting, rather than exposing them to and supporting them in navigating the dilemmas and complexities of the teacher’s role (Mockler 2011).

The present standards do speak of the potential to include local issues in the nation’s curriculum; however, this is only an illusion given that the study programme is already overflowing with compulsory content, to which it is not possible to add any further topics within the available number of hours in the study plan. In reality, as regards the existing study plans, the only element that individual universities may decide for themselves is whether the programmes they offer will have a practical or general academic profile.

At present, ministerial guidelines do not enshrine any obligation to conduct the selection of candidates for teacher education studies through, for

instance, entrance examinations or interviews. Instead, the admissions criteria are regulated by the training institutions themselves, based mainly on grades achieved in the secondary school leaving examination. However, despite this lack of a formal entry process, access to teacher education studies is not without restriction (Eurydice 2009). Higher education institutions are obliged to calculate the number of students to be enrolled, derived from the student-to-staff ratio of 13:1. This ratio is assumed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to be the most important entry mechanism as regards higher education—indeed, this ratio is also the basis it uses for calculating its public spending in the sector (Lewicki 2018, p. 175).

The absence of any rigorous qualitative entry procedure designed to identify those individuals best suited to a career in teaching means that, among those choosing to study on a teacher education course, are people who are not wholly or sustainably motivated to pursue the demands and challenges of the job, instead making their career choice on the basis of, for instance, a childhood memory or by chance (Dróżka and Madalińska-Michalak 2016). In turn, this lack of open communication around entry to the teaching profession leads to low levels of candidate motivation and a lack of identification with the teaching profession. In turn once again, such feelings of displacement and dissatisfaction among some students put a burden on teacher educators to devote enormous amounts of energy to motivating and inspiring them to become good teachers.

Given these tensions and discrepancies, those presently seeking to advance Poland's teacher education field must ask some important questions: what is the status of the teacher educator's profession and what are the competences required for their work today? According to legal requirements, Poland's teacher educators are selected in line with their previous education and/or research attainments, forming a highly heterogeneous group—in terms of qualifications held, place of work, personal development path both within and outside the university, teaching practice, and so on—hence, with such a diversity of experiences and needs, it is difficult to define the requirements for a high quality teacher educator and common principles for supporting teacher educators in the challenges of their work.

To sum up, contemporary teacher education in Poland can be understood as the outcome of a clash between many factors:

1. socio-cultural and political transformations bringing about radical changes in the education system (namely in the form of governmental control);
2. various concepts of teacher education:

- coming from the West,
 - imposed by regulations set by those in power,
 - re-constructed from the past,
 - developed autonomously in educational practice;
3. the still deeply rooted socialist mentality, for instance in terms of hierarchical social relationships and a highly bureaucratic approach to decision-making in the field of education (Koczanowicz 2008).

Therefore, Poland's teacher education field seems to be in a dynamic and constant cycle of review and change. These transformations can be described in terms of a shift from isolation and reduction (i.e. as enforced by the communist authorities prior to the fall of the Soviet Union) to an opening up towards a diversity of approaches to teacher education—although while keeping the practice of teacher education strictly within the framework of the current minister's standards and guidelines. Nevertheless, despite this attachment to standardisation, the direction of change unfolding now—increasing the quality of teacher education—raises hopes for improving the quality of education of future citizens, in turn, thus strengthening the well-being and intellectual character of Polish society of today.

What Next? Suggestions and Recommendations for Further Development

As this chapter has demonstrated, teacher education in Poland has been and is characterised by two key features: firstly, near-constant change—resulting from global, national, and local transformations—and, secondly, the political imposition of policies, reforms, and regulations in the field. These dual influences have and continue to bring about particular consequences: contradictions within transformations in the field of teacher education, and the ideological character of such changes—all with a limited connection to robust research knowledge. As mentioned previously, education is not currently perceived by Poland's politicians as a common good or a process requiring long-term thinking; rather it simply serves as a bargaining chip in subsequent elections, transformed according to the election manifesto of the ruling parties. Indeed, as Śliwerski (2009, p. 19) argues, 'what one has shortened, another has lengthened, what one has enriched, another has diminished by the same amount, what one has broken with, another, as if in opposition, has

established, and so on'. This present approach of supposed public consultations, which, in fact, took place before some of the reforms analysed in this chapter, amount to little more than official documents used as false proof of cooperation between the authorities and stakeholders. Instead, their outcomes should be implemented in education policy. Therefore, we want to argue here that it is worth striving for the full depoliticisation of the teacher education system, instead building fruitful, sustainable, and dialogue-based relationships between politicians, researchers, and professionals (Helgetun and Menter 2022).

Another important issue in the further development of teacher education in Poland is how to ensure that it prepares future teachers with in-depth, reflective understandings of the specifics and challenges of contemporary times. Existing international studies show that focusing solely on 'efficacy, efficiency and meeting imposed standards' (Biesta et al. 2020, p. 458) is an insufficient strategy for training high quality teachers (Mockler and Stacey 2021), meaning that there is an urgent need to use research results in the process of planning and designing changes in the field (Ion and Iucu 2015; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al. 2020). On this note, it is worth taking stock of the fact that while there are numerous small-scale studies on different aspects of contemporary teachers' work in Poland, there is a lack of comprehensive, non-political research on teacher education in terms of the specifics, challenges, and desired directions of changes. Therefore, in order to enrich the existing body of knowledge, there is a need to plan, design, and carry out more independent, large-scale, comparative studies that exist in close dialogue with the day-to-day work and voices of teachers and other education professionals.

In terms of entry into initial teacher education, there is a real need to analyse prospective students' personal and professional expectations, as well their predisposition to work with children and adolescents—all of which then should be taken into account in developing criteria for recruiting the best candidates to the teaching profession. Such requirements at the university recruitment stage would create a chance of recruiting those future professionals who have the greatest potential for doing valuable work in schools (Madalińska-Michalak 2017, p. 97). From a longer-term perspective, this type of threshold would provide an opportunity to increase the prestige of the teacher's job: concretely, the selection of the best candidates for the profession should be paired with an increase in teachers' salaries. Currently, according to the OECD's *Education at a glance* report (OECD 2020), teachers in Poland earn below the average teacher salary of the EU23 (i.e. the 23 EU countries in

the OECD)—in practical terms, this means that many teachers pursue ‘patchwork careers’ (Kędzierska 2012), combining school work with other paid activities in order to meet the cost of living (Korzeniecka-Bondar 2018).

As for teachers’ professional development, offerings should more closely meet their needs and respond to their personal motivations and goals, not only the formal bureaucratic requirements of the career progression system and the needs of their schools. For this purpose, the expectations and preferences of teachers concerning their own professional development should be systematically studied, and taken into account in the planning of teacher professional development paths. It is also necessary to build the vision of professional development as a joined-up, lifelong process—not simply ‘event to event’—but pro-actively providing ‘specific, concrete, and practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms’ (Guskey 2002, p. 382).

Furthermore, going forwards, it is worth undertaking a wider debate on the professionalism and the quality of teacher educator work in Poland. Although Polish education law specifies the criteria for the evaluation of the scientific and didactic activities carried out by academic teachers working in universities and other higher education institutions the qualifications and competences required specifically for teacher educators have not been developed yet. In addition, the universities do not monitor how teacher educators employ their research-based knowledge in their practice, to what extent they know and understand the challenges of teaching in modern schools, as well as whether or not their own research career path is combined with participation in the practice of teacher education. There is no national policy or research regarding the status and professional experiences of teacher educators. Therefore, as some scholars suggest (e.g. Madalińska-Michalak 2011; Szplit 2019), greater policy and research efforts are needed in order to further define and regulate the status of teacher educators in Poland and the competences required for their role, as well as to identify their own professional development needs and expectations.

Summing up, we consider the matters indicated above as key, priority issues to be addressed in the coming years. However, what needs to be done—and what can already be done—is to work on excluding education from the influence of the agendas of the current authorities, and instead work on changing pre-service and in-service teacher education in partnership with the teaching community (i.e. teacher educators, student teachers, teachers, and head teachers).

Conclusion

Over the last three decades, Polish education and the teacher education system have travelled a long road of transformation from post-communist, state-subordinated systems to solutions founded in the order of a democratic society. The dynamics of these transformations reflect the difficulties in building a new social and educational order from the ground up. Indeed, a significant part of these problems has its roots in the past—the greatest among them being the lingering conviction that education is a tool for achieving the goals of politicians and parties. Another barrier to the creation of a responsible education policy and training of teaching staff was the fulfilment of the Bologna Declaration (The Bologna Declaration 1999) provisions: although introduced in order to reduce the gap between Polish and European education, they were never designed with Central and Eastern Europe at their core, meaning that they were not an automatic fit for these cultures and systems. Simultaneously, the massification of teacher education—resulting from, among other things, the introduction of three-stage academic education in the absence of adequate financial and human resource support from public universities—led to the establishment of private higher education institutions offering training for teachers and other education professionals and, consequently, to a huge variation in the quality of teacher education between different institutions. It is worth noting that until 2002, when the State Accreditation Commission began its work, the state did not take a systematic interest in the actual quality of teacher education.

The issues facing contemporary teachers in Poland are no longer purely local (to the country, let alone any particular region or school). Teachers in many different parts of the world are experiencing similar challenges as they learn how to teach, for example, in our increasingly digitised lives, as well as through the profound socio-economic upheaval of a global pandemic. Similar challenges are also emerging for teacher educators, as they search for ways to prepare teachers for these contemporary realities. Therefore, there is a need to seek a balance between international or continent-wide policies and initiatives, and local, community-specific approaches to teacher education (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman 2012) that remain sensitive to historical, geographical, and political influences. Going forwards, Poland should create effective national teacher education policies in parallel with international and European teacher education policy, informed by existing research studies. This multifaceted approach brings with it the promise of a dynamic and responsive education culture that truly caters to the needs of modern Poland.

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