

Educational assessment of pupils in Poland

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Abstract

For many years the subjective assessments of pupils' attainments by the teachers was the basis of schools' effectiveness and quality evaluation. In 1999, evaluation was divided into internal and external assessment. Internal assessment is conducted by means of constant evaluation of pupils' attainments. External assessment is related both to schools' effectiveness and pupils' accomplishments. Each of Poland's sixteen administrative regions is pedagogically supervised by an educational superintendent who evaluates schools' activities. As the reform of educational system is still a continuing process, students' outcomes as well as educational institutions' performances are monitored and compared in order to introduce necessary modifications – optimal for pupils' holistic development.

Introduction

The Republic of Poland, with a population of about 40 million people, is a country located in Central Europe. Its origins date back to the year 966 when the kingdom of Poland was founded. The country's complex history has been influenced by its neighbours: Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Russians, which can be traced in the cultural, political as well as social system. In the 18th century, as a result of diplomatic decisions taken, Polish lands were annexed by the Kingdom of Prussia, the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It resulted in the creation of three different educational systems, which existed till independence was regained in 1918. After World War II, Poland remained within the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989. In that period education was strongly influenced by the Soviets, which manifested in Russian being introduced as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of the schools, and the history of the country was taught from the Soviets' perspective. After the year 1989 the Polish educational system has been undergoing continuous transformation which aims at creating a system which allows pupils to develop attitudes, knowledge and skills indispensable for them to face the challenges of the contemporary world (MSiEN, 2005). In 2010 youth educational attainment level³ in total was at 92.2% (Eurostat, 2010), and lifelong learning⁴ in total was at 5.3% (Eurostat, 2010a).

Structure of the educational system

The Polish school education system is based on the following acts of Parliament: The School Education Act of 7th September, 1991 (with further amendments), the Act of 8th January, 1999 on the Implementation of the Education System of the Education System Reform (with further amendments), the Act of 26th January 1982 Teachers' Charter (with further amendments).

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³ Percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 having completed at least upper secondary education to the total population of the same age group.

⁴ Percentage of the population aged 25-64 in continuing education or attending vocational training to the total population of the same age group.

According to the School Education Act of 7th September 1991, the education system comprises pre-school institutions, primary schools, and lower and upper secondary schools. Higher education institutions are not included in the system and they function on the basis of separate parliamentary acts (Eurydice, 2010).

Pre-school education

Pre-compulsory education begins at age 3. Its ten main goals have been defined in the curriculum for pre-school education in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 23rd December, 2008 and they are related to general intellectual, emotional, social and physical development of the child (Reg., 2008). The list of skills that should be achieved in each area at the completion of preschool is also included in the regulation. There is no formal assessment at this stage, pupils are monitored by the teachers on a daily basis and all worrying signals, as for example, lack of progress in acquiring specific skills, are reported.

According to the amendment to the School Education Act, starting on the 1st September, 2011, one year of pre-primary education is compulsory for 5 year old children, which means that obligatory education starts now one year earlier than formerly.

In the last decade the percentage of children aged 4 receiving preschool education has been steadily growing (from 31.2% in 1999 to 53.2% in 2009) (Eurostat, 2010b).

Primary education

Primary education is compulsory and public schools are free of charge. Non-public schools are obliged to obtain an accreditation. They are usually run by associations, religious organizations or individual persons. Principles related to schools' establishment and management are defined in the School Education Act of 7th September, 1991 (with subsequent amendments) [SEA, 1991]. As the educational system is still under transition, primary education now starts at age 6 or 7, according to parents' decision (starting from the 1st September, 2013, primary education, starting at age 6, will be obligatory) and is divided into two parts:

- first stage education including grades I – III defined as early school education
- second stage education including grades IV – VI.

The main aims of education at this stage are for the pupils to acquire a basic knowledge of facts, principles, theories and practice related to their everyday experience, to gain skills to use this knowledge while solving tasks and problems, and to develop the attitudes that enable efficient and responsible functioning in the contemporary world.

The first stage of education includes the following educational areas: the Polish language, music, art, social phenomena, natural science, mathematics, modern foreign languages, computer classes, technical skills education and physical education. The classes are conducted according to a timetable compiled by the teacher in which the duration of both classes and the breaks depend on pupils' activity. It is recommended that the content of education is broadened according to a spiral system principle, which means that in each successive educational year knowledge and skills previously gained by the pupils should firstly be repeated and strengthened and then expanded.

In the second stage, in addition to the subjects listed above, the following educational themes are introduced: media education, health education, ecological education, citizenship and education for family life. The emphasis is that primary education should prepare the pupils for living in a contemporary, information age society, therefore they should gain skills that would enable them to search and organize information from multiple sources, with a range of different information and communication technologies (Reg., 2008a).

Lower secondary education

Lower secondary educational level, the gymnasium, was singled out and introduced into the Polish educational system in 1999/2000. Beforehand this stage of education was included in the primary level. Lower secondary education begins at age 13 and lasts three years. It is compulsory and free of charge, except for non-public schools that are managed according to the same principles as non-public primary schools.

One of the main aims of the gymnasium is to help pupils to identify their abilities and interests, so that they can reasonably choose their further educational goals. Knowledge is divided into subjects, and the teachers are trained, qualified and certified to teach their subjects. Compulsory educational activities include the Polish language, history, civic education, modern foreign languages, mathematics, physics and astronomy, chemistry, biology, geography, art and music, computer classes, education for safety, and technical skills education. It is emphasized in the core curriculum that special attention should be paid to effective teaching of natural sciences and mathematics, which is in line with the Lisbon Strategy guidelines (EU Council, 2001).

Pupils are also expected to develop attitudes that promote health as well as a friendly environment. Similar to the aims listed in the primary schools' core curriculum, media education and the use of different information and communication technologies is one of the priorities of this stage of education. In individual and social development such qualities as honesty, reliability, responsibility, persistence, self-esteem, creativity, initiative and team work are strengthened. It is also stressed that a school should actively counteract all sorts of discrimination (Reg., 2008b).

Upper secondary education

Pupils who pass the gymnasium graduation exam are entitled to continue their education at the next level. Upper-secondary education is divided into two paths: general upper-secondary education and vocational upper-secondary education. This is non-compulsory education and it starts at age 16 and continues for 2 to 4 years.

1) General upper-secondary education. Pupils following the general education path choose between general secondary school and specialized secondary school. The main aims of the education at this level, as well as the core curriculum, are similar, however the content of the education is broadened and deepened. In general, secondary school pupils choose 2 to 4 subjects to study at an advanced level. On this level a number of additional subjects are included: history of music, history of art, philosophy, ancient culture, history and society, economy in practice.

2) Vocational upper-secondary education. The main aim of vocational education is to equip pupils with knowledge and skills that would enable them to enter the work market. Pupils can choose between two types of school: four-year technical school or two- to three-year basic vocational school. The core curriculum is similar to the curriculum for general upper-secondary schools (Reg., 2008b, 2008c). Vocational training is based on the core curriculum compiled separately for a specific occupation. A list of occupations in vocational education includes 213 vocations (Reg., 2010).

Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Post-secondary non-tertiary education is based on the curriculum of general secondary education. Its main aim is to help pupils in further development of the knowledge and skills gained during secondary education and thus enhance their chances in the work market.

Public schools are free of charge, however their number is limited and non-public schools constitute a significant majority at this educational level (73%). The most frequently chosen specializations include economy and administration, services for people, medicine [CSO, 2010].

Tertiary education

Admission to the programmes is based on the results of a national examination (*Matura*). The number of places available is limited, hence a rapid development of non-public schools has occurred. Tertiary education in Poland includes 5 types of programmes:

- 3 years college programmes;
- degree programmes: Bachelor's degree programmes which last 3 to 4 years and Master's degree programme lasting between 4.5 and 6 years;
- up to 4 years doctoral programmes.

Lifelong learning

As one of the EU member states, Poland participates in the implementation of the Community Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) established according to Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and Council, dated 15th November, 2006. The structure of LLP comprises the following sectoral programmes: Comenius – school education, Erasmus – higher education, Grundvig – adult education, Leonardo da Vinci – vocational education and training, Study Visits.

Another initiative within the field of education is the University of the Third Age whose aims are the education and stimulation of retired members of the community – those in the 'third' stage of life. Typical courses include art, conversation, computers, crafts, debate, drama, history, languages, literature, music, social sciences, philosophy, etc. Some study groups do not have a prepared syllabus, but draw on reports of current affairs in their subject topic to promote conversation and research. Some groups are designed to cross disciplinary boundaries, for example, combining society, technology and science in a fashion not practicable in more formal academic environments. Some groups aim to bridge the generation gap in the field of information technology, opening up an exciting new world to many who might otherwise have been oblivious of it. There are also many less academic or recreational activities including bridge tuition, countryside walks, dance in all its forms, etc.

The new initiative that started in 2010 is the University of the Second Age, for persons 45+, whose aims are to fill the gap between the First and the Third Age education stages in the lifelong learning system, and to combat the social exclusion of marginalized groups. Typical courses include modern languages, finances, law, management, art, physical activity, coping strategies.

The assessment system

Before the education reform, subjective assessments of pupils' attainments by the teachers were the basis of the schools' effectiveness and quality evaluation. In 1999, a new approach was introduced and the evaluation was divided into internal and external assessment.

Internal assessment is conducted by means of constant evaluation of pupils' attainments by their teachers. Teachers are obliged to define educational goals that should be accomplished by pupils as well as the criteria of their accomplishment assessment. New law regulations on the pedagogical supervision oblige the schools to constantly evaluate their work effectiveness in all areas of functioning, which is one of the methods of education quality assurance.

Internal assessment is similar across educational levels. Pupils are assessed separately in each subject starting with stage II of primary education (assessment in stage I is descriptive) on a scale ranging from 1 – unsatisfactory, to 6 – excellent. Pupils' behaviour is also assessed on a scale, although an unacceptable mark should not influence promotion to the next grade. Promotion is granted if a student receives positive marks in all subjects. In a case of an unsatisfactory mark in one subject, the student is entitled to take the examination in this subject and its result decides the student's promotion.

External assessment is related both to schools' effectiveness and pupils' accomplishments. The country is administratively divided into 16 regions. Each region is pedagogically supervised by an

educational superintendent whose aim is to evaluate schools' activities and thus assure a high quality of teaching and care (Reg., 2009).

One of the major reforms of the educational system in 1999 was legislation related to pupils' assessment (Reg., 2007). In accordance with the new law, tests and exams conducted at the end of education on a specific level are organized by newly constituted regional examination commissions which are supervised by the Central Examination Commission (CEC). Their main aims are to compile the propositions of accomplishments standards prescribed standards of accomplishment that will serve as a base for tests and exam organization (CEC), to prepare the content of examination tasks and tests, to organize tests and exams, to analyse tests and exam results, as well as to compile the conclusions and report summarizing the exams, and to train the examiners.

The system of external evaluation includes standardized tests and examinations (table 1).

Table 1: The system of external evaluation

Tests and examinations	Pupils' age	Comments
Upon the completion of <u>primary school</u>	13	– compulsory – results of the test are <u>not</u> the base for admission to gymnasium
Upon the completion of <u>lower-secondary school</u>	16	– compulsory – results of the test are the basis for admission to upper secondary school
Upon the completion of <u>upper-secondary school</u>	19 – 22	– non-compulsory – results of the examination are the basis for higher education school admission
Upon the completion of <u>basic vocational school</u>	18 – 19	– non-compulsory – examination confirming vocational qualification

Primary education

The first external examination test upon the completion of primary school was introduced into the system in 2002. Its aim is to assess children's skills and knowledge across the five areas of learning: reading, writing, and reasoning, use of information and application of knowledge in practice. Results of the test are only to provide a picture of children's attainments and are not used for ranking or selection purposes. Each child is granted admission to lower-secondary school.

Lower-secondary school

At the end of gymnasium pupils take the external standardized test. The following educational areas are assessed: humanities, pure sciences and foreign language. Results of the test are comparable across the country. Admission to upper-secondary school is conducted on the basis of the results achieved in the test. Pupils with best results can choose any school they would like to attend and they are granted admission. Pupils who performed poorly in the test can only choose among schools with a low number of candidates. The test cannot be failed; if a pupil takes the test and receives zero points, he/she is still entitled to continue education at upper-secondary level, although the choice of schools is very limited.

Upper secondary school

At this level two types of external examination are conducted: national examination (*Matura*) and an examination confirming vocational qualifications. *Matura* is a non-compulsory examination for

general and vocational secondary schools graduates (with the exception of basic vocational school graduates). The examination consists of an oral part that is conducted and assessed in schools, and a written part assessed by examiners authorized by the Regional Examination Commissions. Internal oral examinations are conducted in two subjects: Polish language and a foreign language. At least one of the members of the commission has to be appointed from outside the school. Written examinations include three compulsory subjects (Polish language, mathematics and a modern foreign language) and one optional subject (history, physics and astronomy, biology, chemistry, mathematics, geography, citizenship, music history, art history, dance history) and can be taken on basic or extended level. The list of optional subjects can be expanded and includes, for example Greek language and culture or information technology. Results of the written examinations are provided on a percentage scale and are comparable across the country.

The aim of the examination confirming vocational qualifications is to assess knowledge and skills related to a specific occupation under study. The examination consists of a written part (where also knowledge and skills related to employment and business activity are assessed) and a practical part (where the student is required to perform an examination task confirming their practical skills). After successful graduation the Europass Diploma Supplement is issued along with a diploma, upon request. This helps to ensure that graduates' qualifications are more easily understood and recognized outside the country (Dec., 2004).

Subject competitions

Subject competitions (so-called Olympiads) are non-compulsory tests that are organized for secondary school pupils who have a special interest in specific subjects. The basic principles of the competitions are included in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the 29th January, 2002. Each year more than 30 competitions in different subjects are conducted. Usually, there are the following levels in the competition:

- *school level* – pupils with good results are granted mark 5 at the annual assessment in this particular subject;
- *district level* – competition for pupils who passed school level test. Pupils with good results are granted mark 6 at the annual assessment in this particular subject;
- *national level* – competition for pupils who passed district level test. Pupils with best results are exempt from the national examination (*Matura*) in this particular subject and are granted mark 6. The same principle applies to the written examination confirming vocational qualifications if the competition subject is regarded as related to vocational knowledge and/ or skills.

Post-secondary non- tertiary education

Similarly to the vocational school pupils, graduates from the secondary non-tertiary schools have an opportunity to take an examination confirming vocational qualifications.

Tertiary education

Knowledge and skills in each subject are assessed through observation of a student's activity during the educational period or by means of oral or written examination. Assessment is conducted by a teacher responsible for a specific course. Detailed principles regarding assessment rules are included in individual regulations of the institutions.

The body responsible for external quality assurance is the State Accreditation Committee, a national agency established in January, 2002.

Degree programmes: in accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education, 3rd October, 2006 (Reg., 2006), students of degree programmes are obliged to earn a

minimum number or more of ECTS points to be promoted to the next grade and to graduate from the programme.

Upon the completion of a degree programme students must pass a final comprehensive examination on the contents of their thesis and related knowledge. The comprehensive examination is usually oral, or includes another form of assessment as determined by the department.

Doctoral programmes: a doctoral degree is awarded to students who pass the required examinations whose scope is defined by the board of the particular institutions and who successfully defend a doctoral thesis during a public defence. Higher education institutions which are entitled to award doctoral degrees must meet a number of requirements including, for example, number of staff (12) holding a degree of at least the *Habilitation* (higher doctorate).

Lifelong learning

At the University of the Third Age and at the University of the Second Age no formal assessments have been introduced so far.

Conclusions

The internal and external assessment system in Polish education is supported by participation in international educational assessment programmes. The findings of the research are important, also in terms of the verification of the reform of the educational system that is being implemented in our country. On the basis of the 2006 edition of the PIRLS programme results, it was recommended that primary education should start at age 6 as a continuous period of four years of education, (as compared to the hitherto one year of preschool plus three years of primary education), and was found to be more effective (Konarzewski, 2007). The ongoing reform has already proved to be developing in a positive direction in the light of the results of international assessment programmes. Findings from the most recent PISA survey (Program for International Students' Assessment) investigating specific skills among 15 year old students showed that, compared to 2000 there has been a significant improvement in the reading literacy and interpretation skills among Polish pupils. Moreover, since the last survey conducted in 2006, an improvement in reasoning in natural sciences had also been noted. The most important success has been the decrease in the percentage of pupils achieving the lowest level of skills (23.2% in 2000, 15% in 2009, respectively), in reading literacy, which is the EU indicator for both monitoring progress in education quality improvement and for social exclusion. . This achievement has been interpreted as being the result of the educational reform, specifically the introduction of the gymnasium and the system of external assessment. However, it has also been emphasised that more attention should be paid to the popularization of common mathematics education, as well as further development of students already achieving advanced levels of skills (OECD PISA, 2009).

The system of external assessment of student performance and outcomes is one of the most important achievements of the reform. It allows for more objective evaluation of education quality as the results are comparable across the country. However, it is important to note that the traditional form of student's accomplishment assessment, including the interaction between the teacher and a student, not only has educational advantage *per se*, but also enables the qualitative assessment of a student's knowledge, skills and abilities. In some fields of education the focus on quantitative assessment forces the students to acquire the knowledge in a mechanical way, which may be sufficient to answer the test questions correctly, but says nothing about their skills and abilities.

Knowledge and skills acquired during education at the Universities of the Second and Third Age are not subject to assessment so far. Introduction of any form of this can be considered from two perspectives in terms of its psychological impact. Any kind of assessment is always associated with

an elevated level of stress and competitive attitudes, with all their destructive consequences. On the contrary, passing the exam successfully or obtaining the certificate confirming acquired knowledge or skills are important for emotional well being and a sense of accomplishment. The issue should be discussed by the parties involved in order to find a satisfactory solution and to put the recommendation into practice.

As the reform of educational system is still a continuing process, students' outcomes as well as the performance of educational institutions should be closely monitored and compared in order to introduce further modifications that are optimal for students' holistic development.

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