Citizenship Education in Poland

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Background information
Not many countries can boast as long a tradition of citizenship education as Poland. In 1773, right before Poland lost its independence, the Commission of National Education (KEN) was established, one of the first ministries of education in the world. To use modern language, it was precisely citizenship education that KEN deemed one of the essential objectives of public schools. It proposed a synthesis of utilitarian and civic ideas of the Enlightenment, and traditional religious and national models.

In the times of the Polish People's Republic (1945-89), there was no real citizenship education to speak of. Schools' main objective became educating citizens of a “socialist”, quasi-totalitarian state. However, many teachers would distance themselves – overtly or covertly – from such a message and some organisations (e.g. the scouts) retained certain independence. At the same time young people remained under the strong influence of the Catholic Church, of national and family traditions as well as of emerging dissident groups.

The Round Table talks between the communist authorities and the opposition “Solidarity” movement allowed for the change of the political system. The transformation encompassed citizenship education - new curricula and textbooks were written, training courses had to be organised since many former teachers lost credibility. From the very beginning NGOs played an important part in creating the vision and practice of CE.

Definition
Subsequent governments introduced school reforms, repeatedly changing the national curriculum, but fundamental subject matters remained to a large degree unchanged: an individual in a society, active citizenship, political system and public life, law and human rights, challenges for Europe and the contemporary world, plus – in lower-secondary schools – economy, market and entrepreneurship (ICCS 2009 – Encyclopedia).

For many years, however, the dominant mode was education understood as conveying knowledge - developing skills and attitudes was treated as secondary objective. This is one of the reasons why in international studies, Polish students ranked very high when it came to their knowledge, but lower for their skills and participation (ICCS 2009). The need to change such a mode of teaching has been pointed out for years by experts, concerned with the level of the so-called social capital in Poland - cf. e.g. the report Social Diagnosis (Czapliński et al., 2013).

The national curriculum, which entered into force in 2008, clearly states that the subject "Knowledge about society" should combine knowledge with citizenship skills and attitudes. These learning goals comply also with the Council of Europe guidelines and recommendations of the European Parliament on key competences for lifelong learning (Recommendation 2006/962/EC).
Legal environment
The national curriculum for general education in its preamble states that the mission of the school is to form attitudes that condition efficient and responsible functioning in the modern world, while supporting personal and social development of the students. The curriculum lists such values as integrity, responsibility, self-esteem, entrepreneurship, willingness to participate in teamwork, and citizenship attitude in general. It also prescribes that the school takes steps to prevent discrimination (Podstawa programowa, 2008).

Social and civic education begins already in elementary school, including early education in grades 1-3, and during “History and society” lessons in grades 4-6. In lower-secondary and secondary schools “Knowledge about society” constitutes a separate obligatory subject and it is recommended that real life activities and project-based learning should be part of the educational process.

The national curriculum for the subject “Knowledge about society” determines six general objectives/requirements: I. Using and creating information on public life. (E.g. „The student finds and uses information on public life; expresses their own ideas on selected issues of public interest and justifies them; remains open for disparate ideas.”) II. Identifying and solving problems. III. Cooperating on public issues. IV. Understanding and using rules and procedures of democracy. V. Knowing fundamental rules of the Polish political system. (The VI-th objective varies depending on the educational stage) (Podstawa programowa, 2008).

Formal education constitutes the core of CE in Poland and thus it is often blamed for the low participation and young people’s visible reluctance to politics. However, what seems to be objectionable is not so much the curriculum, as the routine way Polish schools work, which does not create appropriate conditions for young people to develop civic and social skills in day-to-day life of their class, school and local community. Students’ voice is barely audible, the student council is often just a formal designation – to avoid the word "fictional" (Kordasiewicz et al., 2013). The Polish school is much too often still the stage of the teachers’ monologue spoken at the students, instead of a dialogue with them; rivalry instead of cooperation; pressure and fear, instead of trust and democracy. There are thousands of teachers and headmasters who have been successful in changing this model, but the dominant pedagogy and school management does not support democratic participation.

The fact that Knowledge about society can be chosen as a subject for the written upper secondary leaving exam (Matura), which determines the educational and professional career, on the one hand increases the importance of the subject, but on the other - it makes CE to some extent instrumental and trivialises teaching.

Ecosystem of non-formal citizenship education
Non-formal CE addressed towards citizens of all ages and in different context does not have a strong position in Poland and there is no uniform policy in this area. It is sometimes conducted by public authorities, including the Polish Parliament, the Chancellery of the President, The Ombudsman, The European Commission Representation and the Ministries (e.g. of Culture and National Heritage). A number of local institutions also treat it as their responsibility, although both the nature and the quality of such activities depends on the vision of “the city hall”. In many places the youth councils or other civic groups are becoming authentic agents of citizenship education and engagement, aspiring to become real partners of the local authorities (Kordasiewicz et al., 2013).

Media - traditional and digital - are an important, but not universally approved of actor on this stage. The quality of feature programmes in the public and private media does not encourage to listen or watch. Infotainment - full of aggressive and populist statements - alienates both
younger and older citizens from the public debate and politics in general (local media turn out a little bit better).

We should also add, that such social life institutions as churches, trade unions, or political parties do not participate in a significant way in citizenship education, at least not out in the open – neither on the national, not the regional level (Siellawa-Kolbowska et al., 2008). Many museums and public libraries have become active in this field, connecting historical, cultural or media education with CE.

Stakeholders
The long list of CE stakeholders includes: schools – pupils and students, parents, teachers and headmasters; Ministry of Education and its agencies, local government educational offices, local and national activists and politicians, media, universities, experts and general public. An important place on the map of CE – both formal and informal – is occupied by NGOs, which co-create programmes and materials, organise trainings and public events (Bacia et al., 2015). NGOs have managed to assure the importance of citizenship education in Polish schools, despite several changes of governments, ministers and dominant ideologies. They are developing legal, global, anti-discrimination, media, intercultural, European or entrepreneurship education; introduce interactive methods of teaching/learning: team projects, debates, simulations or role-playing. Through their contacts they open Polish CE to the world - literally and figuratively.

Challenges to face
Apart from the concentration of the school around the exams, deficiencies in school democracy and project based learning or discouraging image of politics in the media, there are still several challenges left. First of all, what our schools lack is a systematic anti-discrimination education. There exist isolated programmes and teachers involved in education for equality, but such activities are not sufficiently supported by the Ministry of Education and the entire training, monitoring and school evaluation system (Gawlicz et al., 2015)

Training teachers remains a serious challenge. They need ongoing methodological support, which the system does not provide, and opportunities for training offered by NGOs do not satisfy even a tiny fraction of these needs. Most teachers are afraid of raising controversial issues, they are not prepared to moderate student debates, many of them are not modelling authentic civil engagement.

One of the reasons behind such a state of affairs is the fear of taking a stand in a major ideological disputes which exist in Poland (and in Europe in general), which can be briefly summarised as follows: *national vs. civic model of public life, *neoliberal vs. social democratic model of the state and economy, *patriarchal values versus more progressive models of society. CE which does not confront young people with such dilemmas and conflicts of values does not help them to make sense of the political world or redefine it in their own way. Without the renewed model of CE it might be difficult to counteract the “democratic fatigue” and participatory deficit of the growing numbers of young (and adult) Poles who feel disconnected from modern democratic Poland and Europe.

The information in the text was based on the comprehensive analysis of the legal documents concerning formal citizenship education in Poland, of several studies conducted by the academic and research institutions, the official governmental reports, the analysis prepared by the non-governmental institutions and think tanks working in the field of citizenship education and political participation. Due to limited length of the country profile the author has focused only on the key factors contributing to the present situation of CE in Poland which is both dynamic and multifaceted.
References

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