



This paper is taken from

*Teaching Citizenship  
Proceedings of the seventh Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2005

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 389 1

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***Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, B, Wotodzko E., Strzemecka-Kata, J. (2005) Minorities in Poland, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 51-58.***

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit at the time of the conference, and for the initial stages of editing this book
- Lindsay Melling and Gitesh Gohel of IPSE, London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## Minorities in Poland

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Poland is a central European country with largely mono-cultural society and a few longstanding minorities who are present in relatively small numbers. These minorities account for about 3 to 4 per cent of the population, which is some 1.5 million people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). Because of its relatively small size, as well as the communist policy towards national and ethnic minorities in Poland, for many years there were no issues concerning respect of political rights or of the education of the minority population (Lodzinski, 1998).

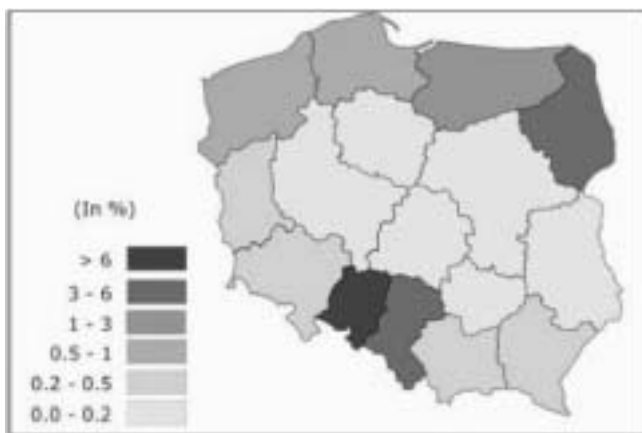


Figure 1. Non-polish nationality declared by citizens of Poland, 2002 (by provinces)  
*Source: Moscal, M. (2004)*

After the restoration of democracy in 1989, new opportunities appeared for national, ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional minorities. The protection of individuals belonging to national minorities become crucial for policy makers. Members of national minorities have equal rights, as a part of Polish society and are able to preserve their own ethnic and cultural identity, and to achieve their social and political aspirations (Iglicka, 2000).

The education system in Poland supports the educational needs of pupils from minority backgrounds. The Education System Act of 1991 requires public schools to enable their pupils to maintain a sense of their national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity, and in particular to learn their own language, history and culture. Instruction in a minority language is provided in schools or kindergartens if the child's parents wish this. Pupils who belong to national minorities and ethnic groups may take their final secondary school examinations in Polish or in the language of a national minority (except for examinations in the Polish language, geography and history) (Gdulewicz, Poplawska, 2004).

There are four possible types of schools for national minorities in Poland:

1. Schools which offer instruction in a language other than Polish, with extended hours for native language learning. Subject instruction is given in the native language of the minority, and the history and geography curricula include information about the minority culture.
2. Bilingual schools or kindergartens, which offer instruction in two languages (Polish and a given minority language).
3. Schools with the opportunity for the additional study of a minority native language. Here the native language is obligatory for pupils who have declared their membership of a minority group.
4. 'Inter-school groups', composed of pupils from different schools, for whom additional native language study is organised.

The minimum number of pupils needed to constitute a class for minority language instruction is seven pupils in primary schools, fourteen in secondary schools and at least three pupils in an inter-school group (Iglicka, 2004).

The following minorities have schools providing lessons 'of' and 'in' their mother tongues: Germans, Jews, Lithuanians, Russians, Slovaks, and Ukrainians. Belarussian, Lemkish and Kashubian are taught in state schools as an additional language (Moskal, 2004).

Changes in the policy towards minorities have resulted in a significant increase in number of schools and interschool units for minority pupils. They have risen from 120 in 1990/91 to 618 in 2002/3, attended by 49,079 pupils (Awramiuk, 2003). But this remains a very small proportion of all the schools in Poland, of which there are 35,000, attended by over 7 million pupils (Polish Official Statistics, 2004). It should also be pointed out that minority education in Poland has a public character: there are very few private minority schools, compared to several thousand of Polish private schools (Lodzinski, 1998).

As well as these longstanding minorities, there are increasing numbers of other non-Polish residents, mostly refugees and migrants from other countries. Their number is expected to grow in coming years as a result of Poland's accession to the European Community.

### **The education system in Poland**

Education in Poland is obligatory for all pupils. Full-time compulsory education starts when the child is six, and lasts until the end of the lower secondary school (gymnasium) and 18 years of age.

A major education reform started in Poland in September 1999. There was a change in the structure, from eight years of primary school to six years of primary school and three years of gymnasium, with a corresponding reduction in secondary school from four to three years. There was also a change in the syllabus and curricula, new teaching methods, improved assessment and evaluation, and teachers' professional development were introduced.

As a result of these reforms, each school in Poland was required to develop its own curriculum based on a national common core. Teachers are free to either follow a curricula selected from a set approved by the Minister or to prepare their own. They can also use various teaching methods and select textbooks from a list approved by the Minister. It is the teachers' decision whether, and to what extent, multicultural issues are present in their teaching programs. Teachers in Poland are now in the position to develop their pupils European and wider identities. The question is: do they know how to do this?

### **Teacher Education Addressing Multiculturalism in Europe – principal findings from the research**

Within the Teacher Education Addressing Multiculturalism (TEAM) in Europe project we are trying to answer this question. We are examining national educational policies and interviewing individual practitioners about their attitudes towards multicultural education, their competences acquired by initial and continuing professional training, their everyday practices of teaching in a culturally diverse society and their vision of future education. Below we present our early findings from this research.

#### ***Teacher Education***

All teachers in Poland must have a higher education degree. Their type of training depends on the level at which they teach. At primary and lower secondary level, a minimum of a bachelors degree is necessary, while teachers at secondary and upper levels require a masters degree. The curricula in higher education institutions are determined by their autonomous authorities, but teachers must complete pedagogical training for all levels of education. This is a minimum of 150 hours in pedagogy and psychology. After their initial training, teachers may extend their skills by participating in different courses, workshops, lectures, programmes and postgraduate studies. Most teachers consider continuing professional development as necessary for keeping their jobs.

In our survey we asked teachers about their educational background, mostly about subjects included in both initial training and postgraduate studies. We were particularly interested in multicultural issues in teacher education curricula, in the ways these issues were presented, in the range of information they were given about minority education, and their pedagogical preparation to work in multicultural classroom and education *towards the different*.

We found that teachers had no information on multicultural education during their initial teacher training. There were no multicultural issues in the curricula. Pedagogical preparation encompassed neither methods of work in the multicultural classroom nor psychological aspects of education *towards the different*. But in contrast to this, many continuing professional development programmes included study of Multicultural/European related issues. These topics are found in the curricula of postgraduate studies, courses, training and workshops for teachers.

#### ***Teacher Competences***

We asked teachers to self-evaluate their professional competencies. We wanted them to compare the professional competencies they had acquired through their initial teacher training with the competencies they now had acquired through their work and practice.

We paid particular attention to how they evaluated their abilities in multicultural education, working with pupils who originate from different cultures.

All the teachers evaluated their general competences for teaching highly. They were very satisfied with the level of education and the skills gained through initial teacher training. Some of them wished that more stress had been put on practical aspects of their training, but felt well-prepared theoretically. Unfortunately these competences did not include any multicultural aspects of education. All the teachers we questioned maintained that their initial teacher training did not prepare them to work with pupils from minority backgrounds. Even after taking courses that included elements of multicultural education, some of them still said that they felt insecure when working with non-Polish pupils. Others claimed that because they had extensive professional experience and continuing professional education they were able to cope with any problems they have when working with minority pupils. They believed they would manage to teach such pupils by transferring general teaching competences. Cooperation with parents, of both Polish and minority pupils, was another problem: teachers felt insufficiently prepared to work with adults.

Only one of the teachers we interviewed – the manager of a minority school in Poland – evaluated his abilities to work in multicultural society highly: he said that he had developed these through his personal and professional experience, rather than through his initial teacher training. Through his continuing professional development and his work as a teacher and headteacher in a culturally diverse environment he became more aware of a multiculturalism in society and its impact on the community and on individuals in the community, and more skilled in supporting the educational needs of pupils from different national backgrounds.

### ***Teaching Experience with minority pupils***

In most schools in Poland it is not common to teach pupils of nationalities other than Polish. Minorities only live in certain parts of the country, and teachers elsewhere usually do not have the opportunity to work with minority pupils. In general, they have neither experience nor knowledge of working in a multicultural classroom.

In our research we investigated teachers' experience of working with minorities. We asked them to describe the contacts they had with children from other cultures. We wanted to know the specificity of working in multicultural environments from their point of view, the problems and constraints they perceived as arising while teaching minority pupils, the solutions they proposed, and what they saw as the advantages of the presence of minority pupils in the classroom.

All teachers working in Polish schools reported some incidental contact with pupils from minority backgrounds. In most cases these were Roma children, and more seldom children of mixed marriages and refugee children. The teachers said that they sometimes felt insecure in these contacts. They identified as main problems the limitation of communication because of the language differences, difficulties in cooperating with both Polish and minority parents, and sometimes cultural differences (such as differences in customs, different historical background and the traumatic experiences of refugee children. All teachers described children's attitudes towards *the different* as tolerant, open and kind, especially in lower grades. This was very different from their perception of

parent's attitudes: they often seemed prejudiced against minorities, and said that this led to changes of their children's attitudes.

A quite different experience was reported by a teacher from a minority school for Ukrainians. His had constant and continuing contact with minority pupils. He reported mutual acceptance and good cooperation between children, youths and parents who came from different national and cultural backgrounds: this, in his experience and practice, was a common phenomenon.

The major problems he described were of an official character: for example, obtaining permission from the local government for Ukrainian teachers to work in a Polish school.

There were also economic problems, such as insufficient financial support for the school and the poor living conditions of families in that region. He also reported linguistic problems such as differences in Polish and Ukrainian language fluency leading to constraints in education and communication.

### ***European/International Dimension in the school curriculum***

There had been many programmes that focus on the development of pupils' European and wider identity, both in the context of the changes in Poland in 1989 and of Polish accession to the European Union in 2004. These are outlined in the core curricula, approved by the Minister of Education. At primary level children should learn about children living in other countries, and the tradition of national and European culture. They are expected to develop a sense of belonging to the European and world communities through becoming familiar with important events and personalities of European and world history. They will learn about co-operation and integration between Poland and the European Union. Later in their education pupils will learn about the European market, on European systems and institutions and aspects of European integration such as EU assistance for Polish education and Polish co-operation with the member states in multilateral and bilateral Community programmes. The core curricula includes just the fundamental topics on European Education and serves as the basis for preparing a detailed curricula about integration issues by individual schools and teachers (Eurybase).

In our investigation we explored the extent to which teachers developed their pupils' European or International identity. We asked them about their attitudes and beliefs concerning multicultural education, about how they applied teaching programs and methods, about their individual initiatives in extending teaching programmes, and about the extent to which they saw themselves as autonomous in their work or dependent on the education system.

Teachers were aware of their influence on pupils. They all felt that had a significant role in shaping children's attitudes, in developing their identity and their tolerance towards minorities, and in how they learned to accept cultural, national, ethnic, religious and other differences. They thought the children they talked felt like citizens of Europe. They suggested that as young children are open to ideas of difference and to new ideas, multicultural education should start as early as possible.

They maintained that multicultural issues were included in most of their teaching programmes, they stimulated school activity, and were raised as discussion questions in many lessons. They usually felt that they were free to decide how and what to teach. They tried to modify teaching programmes and methods to meet particular school conditions

and classroom circumstances, for example, the presence of particular minorities. They tried to take advantage of situations to teach children about other customs, religions and nationalities.

In Polish schools European and multicultural issues are generally referred to occasionally within the curricula, but also are taught through special activities organized by the school.

In the minority schools, the situation is different. Multicultural education is the basis of the curricula, teaching programmes and other activities. Thus teachers who work in the Ukrainian school are required to include multicultural and regional issues in their teaching programmes, as part of their mission. They focus on the development of European identity, teaching mutual respect, understanding and tolerance for diversity.

### **Summary: Educational needs of the multicultural society from the teacher's perspective**

In recent years Polish society has faced political, social and educational changes at national and local level. These have influenced schools' teaching standards and work conditions, pupils' educational needs and teachers' training needs.

We asked teachers to comment on the extent to which the needs and interests of all children in the school, including those from minority backgrounds, were met. We also asked them for their views on the future of education and 'the school of tomorrow', and about the possible problems and gains that might arise from having pupils from diverse backgrounds in school. We also wanted their views on the possible organisation of minority education, curriculum content and initial teacher training.

We found that despite the intentions and ambitions described in the previous section, most teachers had little information about minorities in Poland, their political and economic situation or about educational practices towards them. Multicultural education seemed to be a new concept for the majority of teachers. While they see it as encouraging openness and tolerance through mutual contact, the idea was still not quite clear for them. They expected that there would be changes in the composition of the population and that the increasing number of minority children would affect their work, and anticipated problems might result from cultural differences and previous national conflicts. They acknowledged the lack of tolerance towards *the different* in Polish society, and their lack of knowledge about minorities and their language, history, religion and customs: but at the same time they said that they saw the advantages of diversity in schools. The presence of minority pupils would create opportunities to learn new things about the world and other people and would enrich interpersonal contacts and shapes attitudes of tolerance.

They said that they were confused about proposals for change in the educational system. They had no clear ideas about how the presence of minorities should affect curricula, initial teacher training or future trends in national policies. But they were clear that the current situation had to change. Suggestions included more practical training to develop skills needed for particular problems in the multicultural classroom. There were significant variations in views about how those from culturally diverse backgrounds might be educated: some argued that there should be an assimilation of minorities through teaching; others wanted minorities to have the opportunity to choose how they want to be educated; and yet another view was that the education of minorities should aimed at

creating loyal Polish citizens and developing European identity while preserving and consolidating pupils' national identity.

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