

IS THIS TOO LATE NOW? NO, IT IS NOT!

The machine crashing Polish education should and must be stopped

To turn back the clock to what it used to be like... explains the protagonist of 'The Chairman's Ear' and there is nothing better to illustrate his words than the educational reform about to be implemented in September and promoted by minister Zalewska. Although this catchphrase summarises (after you pour out the dishwasher), almost all arguments by the Ministry of Education in favour of this controversial project, it is hard to deny it has a certain nostalgic charm. In liaison with the fatalistic lilt of the impossibility of turning back from this course, it has a numbing effect - hypnotising, diverting the attention from the impending catastrophe onto our cosseted childhood, when everything just had to be better than it is now.

Perish you unholy delusion! Perhaps it is worth recalling what it really was like in the past before we begin to reverse the spell and to remember why we abandoned that ship in the first place and then to ask ourselves a question; do we really want to get back on board?

The mysterious year 8

My year, was one of the first to march off to the primary school with eight not seven years and since I remember, that bonus year eight shoved in by force into the existing model of 7 + 4 hurt like a proverbial thorn in the side. It appeared in our educational system for the real reasons covered in a veil of mystery. Unofficially, it was the first step to reconstructing Polish education in the vein of the Soviet 'ten year' school model. Subsequent steps had never been taken, however, and so this first post-war educational reform was stuck in a straddling position and ever since lingers on in a bitter aftertaste. Young people arrived to the post primary high schools, they had not yet achieved certificates of educational maturity, but held adult

persons IDs in their pockets. Formally adults, unrestrained by the rules for the adolescents, they often brought a lot of worries to their teachers.

This was most onerous to primary schools which had already been barely coping with such wide spread of age. The year without clearly defined curriculum, dedicated to repetitions (of what had already been covered), became the place from which more ambitious pupils would eagerly escape, if only they had had anywhere to go. System transformation relaxed educational tight grip years before the reform of Mr Handke. Prestigious high schools started to create profiled 'foundation' years with students enlisted from year 7 of the primary schools. Then we had an influx of public high schools. I had a pleasure to participate in setting up the first of such schools in Wroclaw. It attracted huge interest from the students and it is still renowned for its high standard of teaching.

High schools, expendable luxury

It is worth noting that reduction of the years in primary schools and the introduction of public high schools was not a concept brought in a ministerial briefcase, but it was the response to public demand and rising from the social need. The response was brave and risky, and like all major reforms, came at a high price. From the 18 year s perspective, we can safely say that it was a very successful reform indeed. Confirmed as such by the results of the international PISA tests carried out since the year 2000, for assessment of the educational capabilities of the 15 year olds. From the bottom, our pupils climbed in the recent years to the top of the educational league. This is the greatest gift that the III RP could have given to the Polish children. To all of them, not only those from the big cities and strong academic centres. The gift, in

the opinion of the present government, is an expendable luxury. Yes, I am convinced, that behind all these lofty slogans by the ruling party, there is a simple, common, devoid of any finesse underlying reason - economy. Education will be shorter, children cost effectively 'bundled up', one teacher will serve more years... and at the same time, the spending will be cut under any suitable pretext starting from limiting direct educational funding to cutting teachers' salaries. Expensive projects must be financed somehow and the government's coffers are not spilling over.

Can we be sitting quietly?

Personally, I have for a long time been outside the state education. I lead several schools dedicated to developing mathematical potential among the young people and children. I cannot complain, particularly considering my own interests, so I should be sitting quietly, rubbing my hands with glee. But I am not sitting quietly, because I am a teacher first and foremost, I am a mother and a grandmother and this reform - which I am sure - will be a blow to the Polish educational system, to our children, and more so to our grandchildren. It will cost us dearer than anything else before.

This will be most devastating and one of the most difficult to reverse effects of the 'good change'. It must be stopped now before it causes irrevocable damage. Contrary to the prime minister's words, it is not too late for the referendum requested by 910 thousand citizens nor for the change or amendment. If it is too late to withdraw, it is so much more too late to close high schools that have been around for 18 years.

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