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CHAPTER 4

THE CATEGORY OF *CHANGE* IN THE DESCRIPTION OF EDUCATIONAL REALITY

Agnieszka Olczak⁴ & Margarida Pociinho

Abstract

Change is a permanent element of the education system in Poland. A never-ending process of reforming the education has been taking place and the changes concern the education system, legal issues, curriculum and methodology. The article defines the concepts of *change* and *change process*, and it attempts to list types of changes that are introduced or may take place in education. Moreover, the article presents possible initiators of changes and the attitudes of people involved in the educational process to the introduced modifications or reforms. The analysis leads to a reflection on the direction of changes that seem to be particularly important today from the point of view of the quality of teaching as well as the needs and challenges of the 21st century and the expectations and opportunities of the young generation.

Keywords: Education, Change, Change Process, Types of Changes.

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Introduction

Education in Poland, as other European countries, such as Portugal, is undergoing constant changes and endless reforms. The Ministry of National Education, in Poland, is preparing numerous laws and regulations, and subsequent governments are introducing modifications that are to shape it in line with current visions and demands. Education depends on politics, and as Bogusław Śliwerski points out, "since 1993 officials taking over power in the Ministry of National Education have appropriated education for the implementation of the particular political goals of the party or coalition that took them to power" (Śliwerski, 2015, p. 160). At the same time, there are parents, teachers, educational and non-governmental organizations in the social space that advocate a thorough change in the education of contemporary children and adolescents. There is an urgent need to modernize school and teachers' work, and modify teaching methods so that they meet the needs and expectations of young people living in the 21st century. Moreover, the role of relations built by teachers with a group / class and between pupils is also raised, though it is still insufficiently exposed.

Changes are not easy. Most people are afraid of them. In some they release resistance, uncertainty, sometimes fear, in others they generate interest, excitement. However, they always evoke emotions, because changes affect our comfort zone and they can disturb the sense of security and stability. Therefore, this study analyses the category of *change* in relation to the educational reality and it contains the following issues:

- the explanation of the concepts of *change* and *change process*;

- the comparison of the types of changes they have been or may be introduced to education;
- the presentation of possible attitudes of educational entities to introduced changes and their effects;
- the outline of the directions of change that education needs.

This is probably only part of the possible analysis of this problem, but it allows the author to map the issue and outline the key issues.

Change - analysis of the concept

According to *Słownik języka polskiego (Polish Dictionary)* *change* is "the fact that someone becomes different or something becomes different from that it was before; or it is replacing something with something" (<https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/zmiana.html>). The synonyms of the notion of *change* are development, transformation, shift, alteration, transition, modification, etc. (Dąbrówka, Geller, Turczyn, 1998, pp. 161-162). In the context of changes made in the education system, one can describe them as the *change process*, because they are not just single changes, they are not incidental, but they are spread over time and planned, and they should be thought over and carefully justified. Piotr Sztompka claims that the *change process* "begins when someone begins to act in a new way or proclaims a new way of acting as good, right, proper. In each case, we deal with a shift from earlier tradition, a manifestation of originality, creativity, innovation. This change is initiated by an entity " (2003, p. 420). This stance gives the basis for recognizing that education in Poland is in a permanently ongoing process of change, and that changes are widely and very

quickly introduced. They are initiated mainly by political entities, not always (despite declarations) in agreement and dialogue with wider interest groups.

When analysing the category of *change* in the education process, it is necessary to formulate several important reservations:

- Education needs change - the question remains: What kind of change? In what direction should it go? How should it be carried out?
- Change is not a situation that can be judged as good or bad in advance. Its evaluation may be subjective, objective, reliable, superficial, etc. It may depend on the perspective of its introduction, on the position of the evaluator, on the effects that it will cause.
- Various entities (students, teachers, parents, society, politicians) can take advantage of change and here one can ask rhetorical questions - Who should change be for first of all? Who should be thought of first when making changes?

These are probably some of the reservations that can be formulated, but even they show how complex the issue of *change* is in the educational reality.

Types of change

The analysis of *change* reveals its considerable differentiation, and the criteria for the evaluation of its significance are not explicit and obvious. Katarzyna Krasoń takes "a specific perspective of understanding change, which is determined by potential trajectories of its course. It can run along the line of progression and regression"(2011, p. 79). The author explains that progression is a gradual increase, progress, gradual rise, but she also adds that change does not only shift our position forward, it can also mean the movement in the opposite

direction, that is regression, and therefore a quantitative decrease (Krasoń, 2011, pp. 79-80). Thus, specific pairs of opposite types of changes made in education can be identified:

- real changes vs apparent changes,
- justified changes vs. unjustified changes,
- (useful) necessary changes vs harmful changes,
- top-down changes vs bottom-up changes,
- planned (successive) changes vs violent (quick) changes.

Let's stop briefly on each of these pairs to present their short description.

Real changes vs apparent changes

Educational authorities, which change every few years, declare that Polish education is constantly developing, modernizing and responding to the needs of the modern world. However, behind apparent modernity there is a formalized, restrictive, authoritarian school formed by subsequent reforms. Children are taught about their rights, and participation and democratization of education are widely discussed, but on the other hand, it is very easy to notice that changes are apparent and libertarian actions are combated (see Olczak, 2015, pp. 157-171). In fact, changes include lowering or increasing school starting age, frequent changes in core curricula, syllabuses, textbooks, and educational priorities. Changes in teaching methods are often apparent, and school is still in the adaptive paradigm, based on unification and mass (Waloszek, 1998). Also, the modernisation of education, students inclusion in the co-decision process and their engagement in own education are also apparent.

Justified changes vs. unjustified changes

As it was indicated above everyone agrees that Polish education requires change. Its shortcomings and weaknesses are easy to notice. Therefore, some changes are justified, because they are enforced by civilization progress, the development of science, as well as changing social needs, and changes in the lives of subsequent generations. They also result from scientific studies and conclusions drawn on their basis. These justified changes include, for example, computerisation of schools, more foreign language classes, more focus on science, development of entrepreneurship, creativity, democratization of education - as a condition for preparing citizens for living in a democratic society. However, the changes introduced in recent years cannot all be justified, and some of them raise doubts and fears of many social groups. These include the withdrawal of the decision to lower the school starting age, and the decision to liquidate junior high schools, which have had better and better educational results in recent years.

Necessary changes vs harmful changes

It is another important distinction of changes that can be introduced in education. Using the terms suggested by Krason (2011), changes that lead towards *progression* are necessary, and harmful changes are those that lead to *regression*, for example in development, in the level of knowledge, quality of education, authority, etc. Brzezińska points out that the concepts of *change* and *development* are not identical (2000, p. 41). Moreover, they are not closely related to each other, because development is not always the result of change.

Education needs change that stimulates development and facilitate the growth of students, teachers, and even parents. Klus-Stańska and Kruk (2009) point that the change that is

"developmentally important is not temporary, but long-lasting, it is not a single change, but it belongs to a complex series of changes, it has a relatively irreversible nature, it leads to increased diversity of the system (here: the cognitive one) and its increased internal integration and complexity. In the relations between the individual and the (material and social) environment, the developmental change is characterized by the fact that its causes lie inside the system" (p. 460).

This results in a very important task for education, if we want to make changes that are desirable, needed, developmentally useful - it is necessary to get to know the student, their needs, and potential, and to support their development, instead of forcing them to meet external, unified requirements, which often do not take into account individual possibilities and interests. The authors emphasise that the change understood in this way will support human development and will be

"the effect of a sensitively built relation between the requirements of the child development and the response of the environment to this development. This is a completely different approach from the one commonly shared by teachers and parents, in which it is assumed that the child changes and develops when it responds to the requirements of the environment" (Klus-Stańska & Kruk, 2009, p. 460).

Positive changes include those that induce self-awareness, support the development of individual potential, develop cognitive abilities, the ability to think critically, cooperate, etc. The harmful ones are those that teach conformism and impose unreflective learning of imposed patterns.

Top-down changes vs bottom-up changes

Changes in education can be initiated from different sides, by different entities, guided by very different goals. In the context of social changes Sztompka lists six types of entities initiating changes, so-called initiators of changes (2003, pp. 420-422):

1. *Innovative individuals* – in this case predispositions and prerogatives for introducing changes and innovations are based on individual, distinctive features, competencies that are visible and recognized sufficiently in a wider community or in the whole society;
2. *Innovative roles* – here, the predispositions and prerogatives for introducing innovations are built into the structure of the social role, regardless of who exactly performs it, eg artists, scientists, inventors, etc.;
3. *Innovative organisations* – they include parliaments, commissions, research teams, etc. that are obliged to initiate and introduce normative changes. Their actions are collective and the proposed activities are created as a result of cooperation;
4. *Innovative social circles* – they are often of negative, contestant, nonconformist nature, they reject accepted habits and practices, they want change;

5. *Social movements* – they are concentrated on changing norms or social values (eg youth, religious, ecological, political movements, etc.), they focus on a specific, clearly articulated goal, either a specific or general one and all their efforts and activities lead to the achievement of the goal;
6. *Ordinary people* – they introduce change in their daily lives, and their actions find followers, first among friends and then in wider circles.

In education, changes come from all these entities, although recent years have brought an essential increase in top-down changes formulated and introduced by the Ministry of National Education and the Council of Ministers, often with the marginalization of opinions expressed by various circles, groups, and social movements that could significantly contribute to the shape of the changes. Politicians and the Ministry of National Education have the right to introduce reforms and make profound changes in the education system, but one could expect them to be carried out in consultation with experts, scientists and the groups they concern, who due to their wide experience and competencies can constructively contribute to the shape of changes.

Regardless of top-down regulations, each teacher, parents' councils, and student parliaments can initiate changes, seek bottom-up changes concerning narrow groups and smaller communities. They can seek changes that improve the quality of work in particular institutions, affect relations, atmosphere, regulations, syllabuses, and the effects of individual schools / classes / groups. Each teacher can also make changes in their teaching style, methods, manner of building relations and mutual trust with the students.

Gradual (successive) changes vs violent (quick) changes

As it has been observed recently, a quick change is possible, even in relation to complex issues such as the structure of the education system in the state, double change in the school starting age, the core curriculum change, or a rapid exchange of textbooks. The quality of these changes, and their long-term effects raise questions and doubts. However, the responsibility of those who stand behind these decisions will not be discussed here – as this is a problem for a separate study.

Changes that affect people's lives, their future, attitudes, worldview, etc. (and this is the case for education) are not changes that can be introduced quickly, without extensive scientific research and thorough discussions preceding them, debates with the scientific and expert environments, as well as with head teachers, teachers and any organisations affected by the change. These are changes that must be meticulously and responsibly planned for many years, wisely spread over time, because their effects will not appear overnight, but will be visible only in the long term. Important changes cannot be introduced impulsively for the current interest of one group. They must be made with over-political responsibility for the development of society in many subsequent years. The above types of changes probably do not constitute a complete list, but they have been selected to show the issue of *change* from different perspectives and present both the existing opportunities and threats and problems that it may carry.

Attitudes of entities to changes and their effects

Changes introduced in the education system affect all entities that are in any way connected with it, and in particular students, teachers, head teachers, parents. Changes can improve their situation or make it worse, they can also bring nothing new to their situation. Depending on what changes are introduced and how they are carried out, the effects can be very diverse (Sztompka, 2003, p. 428):

1. *Status quo*, i.e. no change (when the change has not affected the situation of entities);
2. A change contrary to the intended one (when an achieved effect is opposite to the planned one);
3. A marginal change (when only 1 component has changed and it is insignificant);
4. A radical change (when central, fundamental components of the structure have been transformed, e.g. the basic system of values);
5. A fragmentary change (when only a minor correction is made);
6. A total, revolutionary change ("system change" - when all the essential elements, compromises, segments have been modified).

Depending on whose specific interest, the change affects and how big the change is, the attitudes of entities vary from approval, interest, indifference, fear, anxiety, to more or less manifest resistance.

The attitude of entities towards change also depends on the awareness of these entities regarding their own capabilities. Robinson and Aronica (2015) claim that

"whether you are a student, teacher, parent, head teacher or a decision maker, if you are involved in education in any way, you can be part of change. For this purpose, you need three forms of understanding: *criticism* of the current state of affairs, a *vision* of what education should be like, and the *change theory* to know how to go from one to another" (p. 20).

The authors are of the opinion that if one is involved in education in any way, there are three possibilities of situating oneself towards change: one can make changes within the system, one can exert pressure on changes in the system itself or operate outside the system (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 21). Within the system bottom-up initiatives are possible, e.g. the activities of teachers aiming at their high professional skills and modernised teaching methods. Also, scientific and teaching communities, parents, students, NGOs, etc. can insist on changes in the system. However, these are often ineffective activities, which is why parents tend to choose actions outside the system, for example by choosing home schooling.

The outline of the directions of needed changes

Lech Witkowski claims that reference to the category of *change* as an operative context and a tool of social analysis makes it possible to present the potential subject of changes in three dimensions (2010, pp. 92-93):

- one refers to the "pool of possibilities" as cultural premises of potential action. The author points out that "without a proper *repertoire of identity* and a pool of meanings in the world of the individual, and without a vision

of an alternative to a given situation, one cannot even raise an issue of change" (Witkowski, 2010, p. 92);

- the second is the dimension of practical attitudes, where the preferences of social involvement collide, which in turn will be the mechanism for selecting social situations which are perceived as desirable or unacceptable;
- the third dimension is the area of objective social demand, where, regardless of barriers, there is a need for quality changes in social practice (Witkowski, 2010, pp. 92-93).

These three dimensions outline the directions of desired changes. Important changes will take place in the area of creating opportunities for development, for reaching the potential of individuals (that is external opportunities that are conducive to learning, that create optimal conditions for it, support internal capabilities, and the resources of the individual). A vision is needed, a desire to strive for what is important in the life of society. Education must support society in building identity and in development. It should give tools to exist effectively in contemporary dynamic times. Changes in attitudes are another challenge for education. What attitudes are expected in the 21st century? Are we to trigger and facilitate competition and individualism, or should we focus on cooperation and collectivism? Should we teach adapting to the existing conditions, or should we concentrate on readiness for change, the ability to learn constantly, not accepting the things that limit us or that we do not approve of? etc. And finally, what is the objective social demand for change? What changes are needed?

It seems that in a democratic state in the 21st century, the social demand will focus on strengthening democratic order, on seeking solutions aimed at democratizing education. The analysis of the current situation in Poland shows how important this challenge is. Therefore, it should be emphasised that: "to live in a democratic order, and at the same time to create and improve it: such skills are simply not in blood and one does not get them anywhere. These skills need a wise state education policy, family environment and a wider social circle positively stimulating the development of democratic competencies. There should be no contradiction between these circles; on the contrary, the best effects are achieved through the cooperation within the *educational triangle* formed by the family, teachers and young people" (Nowak & Cern, 2008, p. 372, quoted in Śliwerski, 2015, p. 29). It is also necessary to add constructive, consistent cooperation between the above-mentioned entities and educational authorities, because without this the actions taken will be incoherent, sometimes contradictory, and therefore harmful for development, education and even society.

Conclusions

Change is inscribed in the lives of modern people and communities. Individuals who can cope with the stress a new situation brings and who are ready to learn new things to keep up with progress can manage change effectively. As Witkowski notices

"it is not a question of single removal of the inability to meet the need for change in social life. It is a matter of permanent inclusion of the ability to respond to that need and even participate in its stimulation into the

mechanisms of pedagogical practice in order to counteract potential threats and real conditions of individual, local and civilizational pathologies" (2010, p. 92).

For this reason, the challenge for education is to develop students' skills for independent, critical thinking, foster their independence of thinking and abilities to make choices and take responsibility. Moreover, "one of the unchanging goal of education, in the past, now and in the future, is to prepare young people for life in a reality that they enter (...), good education must stimulate and promote openness, instead of closing the mind" (Bauman, 2012, p. 31).

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