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Teacher education in Poland (1970–2024): policy development, legislation, and period-specific challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of teacher education in Poland from 1970 to 2024, detailing socio-political and economic changes that have shaped educational policies. The study uses a historical and policy analysis approach, examining legislative documents, policy developments, and educational outcomes across three distinct periods – Socialist Era (1970–1989), Transition and Integration Era (1990–2004), and Modernisation and Reform Era (2005–2024). During the Socialist Era, centralised control and ideological rigidity resulted in a uniform system. Policy changes aimed to align education with socialist principles, often at the expense of flexibility and creativity. The Transition and Integration Era saw significant reforms driven by Poland's move towards a market economy and European Union integration. This period focused on decentralising the education system, improving teacher qualifications, and aligning with European standards, though it faced challenges such as resource disparities and resistance to change. In the Modernisation and Reform Era, efforts have focused on improving teacher education quality through modernisation and adopting international best practices. There has been an emphasis on innovation, technology integration, and lifelong learning. Despite progress, issues like equitable resource distribution and the relevance of training programmes persist. The paper concludes with recommendations for further decentralisation, better resource allocation, continuous professional development, and integrating innovative teaching methods. These recommendations aim to guide future policy and enhance the effectiveness of teacher education in Poland. Implications for research include exploring the impact of these reforms on teacher effectiveness, policy adaptation, and practice improvement in education.

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Introduction

Teacher education is a fundamental pillar of any educational system, having a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning (Livingston 2023; Mifsud

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2023). It faces global challenges that are mutually concerning to educators around the world (Goodwin, Madalińska-Michalak, and Flores 2023), and the challenge of continually reforming its programmes and operations, addressing issues such as the difficulty of improving teachers' professional skills due to contextual factors, a limited understanding of teaching and teacher education, and the disconnection of many universities from practical school settings (Akiba and LeTendre 2017; Tatto 2015). Various reform strategies have been suggested, including a focus on effectiveness through performance management, promoting innovation and choice by encouraging competition, integrating training within the school environment, and continuously improving teacher education by refining existing practices. However, no single approach or combination of strategies has been able fully to meet the aspirations for high-quality teaching and teachers or the governmental expectations for ongoing improvements in school student progress and achievement (Lee and Day 2016, p. 2–13).

By reviewing and analysing a nation's teacher education system, we assess what teachers need to know, what skills they should possess, and how they should be inclined, effectively to shape the future adult citizens of society over the next ten to twenty years. Teacher education reflects a society's vision for its future, symbolising its core values. This realisation has likely made teacher education a focal point of political interest in numerous countries (Menter 2022, p. 96).

In Poland, the evolution of teacher education over the past five decades reflects broader socio-political and economic transformations that have shaped the country's educational landscape. These changes have been driven by shifts in political ideologies, economic restructuring, and efforts to integrate with global educational practices. As a result, the development of teacher education in Poland can be divided, as it will be shown in this paper, into three distinct phases, each marked by unique policy developments and reform challenges (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 2008; Madalińska-Michalak 2023). From the centralised, ideologically driven policies of the socialist era to the sweeping reforms of the transition period and the modernisation efforts of the 21st century, each phase has introduced distinct challenges and advancements in teacher education.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of teacher education policies and reforms in Poland. By examining the impact of legislative changes and policy development across three distinct historical periods, the paper seeks to highlight how these factors have shaped the development of teacher education. The analysis will explore key challenges and achievements within each period, offering insights into the historical, political, and economic contexts that influenced educational practices. This approach provides a detailed examination of significant policies and reforms affecting teacher education during each period, highlighting how these changes have influenced the field. Finally, based on the historical analysis and current challenges, implications for future policy and practice, and suggestions for further research are outlined.

The documentary and materials foci of the analysis are the official regulations constituting the shape and functioning of the education system, available data sets relating to the education system in Poland, as well as scientific reports and analyses relating to the state of the Polish education system.

Teacher education across three phases (1970–2024)

The evolution of teacher education in Poland over the past five decades can be divided into three distinct phases, each marked by unique goals and challenges (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

(1) Socialist Era and Transition (1970-1989): This period was characterised by centralised control and ideological rigidity, with teacher education focused on maintaining ideological conformity and state doctrines.
(2) Transition and Integration Era (1990-2004): Following the fall of communism, this era saw rapid reforms and decentralisation, aiming to align Poland's education system with European standards and modernise practices.
(3) The Modernisation and Reform Era (2005-2024): This phase has been defined by efforts to modernise educational practices through technology and innovation, implement substantial reforms, and address both European and broader transnational educational expectations.

These phases reflect the shifting political, social, and economic contexts that have shaped Poland's educational landscape, illustrating the ongoing interplay between national needs and international standards. Together, these three phases illustrate the dynamic nature of teacher education in Poland. Each phase in the evolution of teacher education in Poland from 1970 to 2024 highlights a progression from quantity and ideological conformity towards quality and modernisation (Gołębniak 1998; Kwiatkowska 1997; Kwieciński 1998), demonstrating the ongoing efforts to adapt to changing educational needs, to modernise and align with European standards and global trends (OECD 2015, 2019). The detailed description and analysis of each of these three distinct phases will be provided below.

Phase 1: socialist era and transition (1970–1989)

The period from 1970 to 1989, known as the Socialist Era and Transition, continued to be marked by centralised control and ideological rigidity. During this phase, Poland's education system, including teacher training, was influenced by broader political and economic shifts.

Poland's education policy was subordinated to the principles of central planning along with the entire national economy by the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR). The PZPR attempted to increase the number of children of workers and 'peasants' in general secondary schools and universities, in order to reduce the influence of the hitherto 'bourgeoisie' in all areas of social life. Pupils from smallholder and agricultural labourer families and the families of industrial workers, received scholarships to attend high schools and were entitled to additional points 'for origin' in university entrance exams (Levitas and Herczyński 2021: 56).

The *Ministerstwo Oświaty* (Ministry of Education) administered universities and primary and secondary schools through a network of provincial education offices – school superintendents, who set school budgets, hired teachers and school

principals, exercised strict curricular and ideological control over teachers and schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, the PZPR began to limit the increase in the number of students as, in its opinion, Poland did not need so many highly educated people. At the same time growing economic stagnation and waning revolutionary fervour meant that the party paid less attention to the number of socially disadvantaged students, and to supporting the education of children from neglected backgrounds. As a result, by the time the system collapsed, only 10% of rural children attended high schools (*licea*) and less than 5% of this category went on to receive a master's degree (Golinowska and Rumińska-Zimny 1998).

The key events in Poland from 1970 to 1989 reflect significant shifts in teacher education, shaped by broader socio-political changes. In December 1970, widespread worker protests in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Elbląg, and Szczecin led to violent clashes with the government. These disturbances resulted in a leadership change within the PZPR, with Edward Gierek replacing Władysław Gomułka as First Secretary. Gierek's leadership brought a more liberal approach to governance, which also impacted education policy. By 1971, under Gierek's administration, economic reforms were introduced to modernise Poland's economy. These reforms included investments in educational infrastructure and efforts to enhance teacher training, aiming to meet the needs of a developing society. The 1973 Report on the State of Education (Szczepański 1973) highlighted the inadequate professional qualifications of many teachers and called for substantial reforms. This report emphasised the need for higher education qualifications for teachers to improve educational quality. Consequently, reforms were introduced, including comprehensive academic programmes designed to provide teachers with advanced pedagogical and subject-specific knowledge. In 1974, the education reform addressed the issues identified in the 1973 report. This reform aimed to improve the overall quality of education and enhance teacher training programmes better to prepare educators for their roles. Continuous professional development for teachers was also emphasised (Szczepański 1973). The declaration of martial law in December 1981 brought political repression and economic hardship, impacting the education sector. Despite these challenges, efforts to improve education persisted, though progress was often hampered by the harsh socio-political climate. By 1989, Poland began a political transformation from a communist regime to a democratic government. This transition renewed the focus on reforming the education system, including teacher education, to align with democratic values and modern educational standards.

The events from 1970 to 1989 significantly influenced the evolution of teacher education in Poland. The period saw an increasing recognition of the need for well-qualified teachers and continuous professional development (Kwieciński 1998), setting the stage for further educational reforms in the post-1989 era. The reference point for this period are the changes made to teacher education at the academic level (at universities) in 1973 and the education reform of 1974. This era concluded with the crisis triggered by the political transformation conventionally associated with 1989 (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 2008, p. 428). The political changes in 1989 set the stage for a comprehensive overhaul of the education system, including improvements in teacher training to address the deficiencies exposed during this turbulent period.

The foundation of the teacher education

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the foundation of the teacher education system was based on the theses and subsequent resolutions of the 5th Congress of the PZPR. This system functioned in two forms: firstly, three-year higher vocational studies (complemented by a two-year master's programmes), conducted at higher teacher training colleges; and secondly, integrated master's studies. The first type of study was implemented by higher teacher training colleges, either as branches of academic institutions or as independent entities, while the second type was managed by universities, higher pedagogical schools, polytechnics, academies of physical education, higher agricultural schools, and higher economic schools. Only the resolutions of the 8th Plenum and later the 6th Congress of the PZPR clearly outlined the goal and tasks related to the gradual but fairly rapid transition in the education of candidates for primary school teachers from vocational higher education to academic studies. These resolutions also emphatically raised the critical issue of improving the education level of serving teachers.

In the early 1970s the country's education system was heavily influenced by socialist ideology. The government exerted strict control over teacher education, mandating curricula that emphasised Marxist-Leninist principles. The primary focus of teacher education during this era was to ensure ideological conformity and produce teachers who adhered strictly to state doctrines (Kwiatkowska 1997).

Educational reports and reforms

In the 1970s and 1980s, efforts to outline prospective directions for the development of Polish education intensified to an unprecedented scale in the post-war period (Kluczyński 1986). These efforts were influenced by broader socio-political changes and the drive to modernise the country's educational infrastructure to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. From 1973 until the systemic changes in 1989, two main educational reports were produced in Poland, analysing the state of education at all levels, including higher education and teacher training. These were: the 1973 Report on the State of Education in the People's Republic of Poland (Szczepański 1973), and the 1989 report: Education as a National Priority: Report on the State and Directions of Development of National Education in the Polish People's Republic Education as a National Priority (Komitet Ekspertów do spraw Edukacji Narodowej 1989). These comprehensive reports aimed to diagnose the educational system and propose various ways to improve it. They highlighted the most important and immediate reasons underlying the necessity for a comprehensive reform of the entire education system.

At the beginning of the 1970s, it was evident that teachers, as indicated by the diagnoses in the 1973 Report on the State of Education in the People's Republic of Poland, had insufficient professional qualifications. The low quality of the teaching staff necessitated changes in teacher education. The magnitude of the tasks in teacher education and training was illustrated by the following indicators: of the 358,000 teachers employed, only 50,000 (15.8%) had higher academic education and around 13,000 (3.5%) had higher vocational education. Thus, more than 80% of the total number of employed teachers did not possess the education necessary for the realisation of future educational tasks (Szczepański 1973, p. 395–396).

The data presented in report confirmed the low level of education among teachers of many subjects. Implementing a programme for teacher education and professional development would require a detailed effort from all higher education institutions and appropriate organisational measures from educational authorities. Teacher qualifications were a decisive factor not only in realising future educational tasks but also in the ongoing process of improving the work of schools at all levels and types.

Equally important was the problem of ensuring the preparation of academic staff capable of modernising and intensifying processes at this level of education. Optimising these processes required, on the one hand, qualitative changes in the professional preparation of academic staff and, on the other hand, a significant increase in their numbers.

In 1973, significant reforms in teacher education were implemented at the academic level, which aimed to address the inadequacies and limitations of the existing system (Kwiatkowska 1997). These changes were crucial in shaping the future direction of teacher training. The education reform of 1974 further consolidated efforts to standardise and centralise the educational system in Poland. This reform aimed to address the significant disparities and inefficiencies within the existing framework. A unified curriculum was introduced across all educational institutions, ensuring consistent quality of education nationwide and reducing regional disparities. The administrative control of schools became more centralised, with the Ministry of Education taking a more active role in policy implementation and oversight, streamlining decision-making processes and improving coordination. Enhancing the qualifications and skills of teachers was a major focus, with revised training programmes that included more practical and pedagogical components, aligning with the new educational standards and needs. Recognising the growing demand for skilled labour, vocational education was expanded. New vocational schools were established, and existing ones were upgraded to provide comprehensive training aligned with industry requirements. Investment in educational infrastructure also played a crucial role. The reform led to the construction of new school buildings, the renovation of existing facilities, and the provision of modern teaching aids and equipment. The curriculum was adjusted to place a greater emphasis on science and technology subjects, preparing students for future challenges in a rapidly evolving world. Efforts to increase access to education for all segments of society, including rural and underserved communities, were significant. Scholarship programmes and transportation services were introduced to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These initiatives marked a significant step towards creating a more equitable and efficient educational system in Poland, laying the groundwork for subsequent changes in education and teacher education, and setting the direction for future educational policies and developments (Banach 1997).

Teacher education institutions

In the early 1970s, Poland had a well-established network of teacher education institutions. There were approximately 15 teacher training colleges (*studia nauczycielskie*), which focused on preparing teachers for primary and secondary schools. Additionally, several universities and higher education institutions offered specialised programmes in teacher education (Kwiatkowska 1997). The University of Warsaw and Jagiellonian University in Kraków were among the leading institutions providing advanced teacher education

programmes. These institutions were responsible not only for imparting pedagogical skills but also for ensuring that future teachers adhered to and propagated socialist values. Regarding the selection of programme content, teacher training institutions can be divided into two categories (Szczepański 1973):

(a) At universities, the primary focus is on scientific content closely related to the discipline chosen by the student. This content is uniform for all students, regardless of whether they later pursue a teaching career or not. Pedagogical preparation occurs within the framework of so-called pedagogical science components, amounting to 60 to 120 hours over five years of study, as well as during a one-month practice, typically conducted in secondary schools. Since it is uncertain by the end of the studies who will choose teaching as a profession, planned educational work aimed at shaping the personality of future teachers was not carried out (Szczepański 1973). This situation has been criticised in many circles, including within university environments. Consequently, various improvement projects for the existing state were often developed, for example by the Commission for the Advancement of Higher Education Didactics, but these were not implemented.
(b) In higher pedagogical schools, which were solely dedicated to teacher training, the structure of programme content differed from that of universities. Although the primary focus of the study programmes was still on subjects related to the chosen scientific discipline, a significant portion of the content was also dedicated to psychological and pedagogical subjects, supported by a three-month pedagogical practice with various forms. These schools provided favourable conditions for conducting educational work with prospective teachers, with the aim of developing the attitudes and character traits essential for a teaching career.

Impact on teacher education

The impact of social, economic and political changes on teacher education was characterised by a uniform approach to teacher training. The centralised approach prioritised ideological conformity over pedagogical innovation in teacher training. This focus on compliance often came at the expense of fostering creativity and critical thinking in future teachers.

Challenges and achievements

During the period from 1970 to 1989, teacher education faced significant challenges due to the political and economic constraints of the era. Challenges during this period included limited academic freedom, insufficient resources, and low teacher salaries. Despite these issues, the era saw the establishment of foundational structures for teacher training and efforts to maintain high professional standards (Komitet Ekspertów do spraw Edukacji Narodowej 1989; Szczepański 1973). The focus remained on maintaining ideological purity and producing compliant teachers who adhered to state doctrines. Efforts to reform teacher education were often constrained by political interference and a lack of comprehensive long-term planning (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 2008; Madalińska-Michalak 2023; Szczepański 1973). Although some attempts were made to improve pedagogical

practices and expand teacher training programmes, these were frequently limited by the prevailing political environment.

The research on teacher education during the studied period indicated that, among the main challenges of teacher education were teaching methods at the teacher education institutions, provision of didactic resources for education, organisation of teacher education, and opportunities for continuing education and professional development (Gołębniak 1994, 1998; Lewowicki 2007; Michalak 2005). Teaching methods predominantly revolved around traditional verbal instruction (Gołębniak 1998; Lewowicki 2007). This approach, while effective in transmitting information, primarily engaged school students' memorisation. Although innovative methods, such as active and problem-based learning offered potential benefits like self-monitoring, self-assessment, and individualisation of instruction, they were not effectively integrated into teaching practices (Gołębniak 1997). As a result, these progressive methods frequently ended up as mere concepts rather than practical tools, leading to scepticism about their applicability in real educational settings (Kwieciński 1998).

The provision of didactic resources, particularly technical aids, faced notable deficiencies. Teacher training institutions, especially universities, struggled with inadequate technical equipment. This issue was compounded by the absence of comprehensive, forward-looking action programmes designed to address these deficiencies. Piecemeal solutions, such as efforts to distribute film projectors without providing accompanying films or attempts to use teaching machines without standardised programmes and tests, did not yield the expected outcomes. Additionally, the technical teaching equipment produced domestically was often of poor quality, leading to reluctance among teachers to utilise it effectively.

The organisational structure of teacher training institutions reflected a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge and formal instruction, with less focus on practical application and integration of modern teaching methods (Gołębniak 1997; Kwiatkowska 1997). This organisational approach often resulted in a disconnection between educational theory and classroom practice, hindering the effective preparation of teachers for real-world teaching environments. Efforts to reform and improve organisational practices were frequently hindered by insufficient planning and a lack of coordinated, strategic development. Opportunities for continuing education and professional development were limited. In-service training programmes were often ideologically driven and focused on reinforcing socialist principles rather than updating teachers' pedagogical skills (Kwiatkowska 1988). Nonetheless, some teachers sought to improve their qualifications by pursuing further studies at universities, although this was not widespread due to the constraints of the system.

Phase 2: transition and integration era (1990–2004)

The year 1989 was a crucial year in the contemporary history of Poland. After the agreements of the so-called 'round table' resulting from the negotiations between the representatives of the opposition and the representatives of the ruling government, the first partially free parliamentary elections took place in June 1989. The first totally free and democratic elections were held later, in 1991. A dynamic period of political, social and economic transformation began in Poland. The rebirth of parliamentary democracy led to

the creation of many political parties and the development of independent mass media. The decentralisation of public authority continued along with the local reforms. The introduction of the market economy limited the State intervention in the economy and initiated restructuring and privatisation processes.

In the 1990s Poland entered the path leading to integration with Western European countries. In 1991 it became a member of the Council of Europe and concluded the Association Agreement with the European Community, which was ratified by the European Community in 1993. Poland became a member of the OECD in 1996 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999. On 1 May 2004 Poland became a member of the European Union.

The government of Jerzy Buzek took a hard look at reforming the state structures and public administration arrangements of Poland. On 1 January 1999 four major reforms were introduced, substantially changing the structure of healthcare, education, the pension system, and local government administration. The extent of the changes and the fact that all four reforms were initiated on the same day can be considered as representing a symbolic final step in the Polish socio-political and economic transition which had started in 1989.

The most important reasons underlying the necessity to carry out a comprehensive reform of the Polish education system in the 90's included the following: (i) the lack of capacity within the education system to adapt to the pace and scope of economic, social and cultural change; (ii) a crisis in the educational role of the school resulting from the lingering predominance of the transmission of information over the development of skills, competences and the shaping of personality; (iii) the lack of equal opportunities for gaining access to education for all at all its levels, and the low percentage of young people completing secondary and higher education; (iv) the necessity to adapt the education system to the provisions of the Constitution and the system reform of the State; (v) the necessity to adapt vocational education to the changing needs of the market economy; and (vi) the need to establish closer links between schools at all levels and the family, as well as the local community (Bogaj, Kwiatkowski, and Szymański 1998: 34 – 35; Michalak 2005, 141).

The objectives of the school reforms were formulated as follows: (i) to decentralise education, (ii) to raise the level of education in society through the dissemination of secondary and higher education, (iii) to provide equal educational opportunities, (iv) to foster the improvement of the quality of education understood as an integral process of upbringing and education, (v) to reduce the number of young people attending basic vocational schools, and (vi) to increase the number of students in secondary schools (MEN 1999). Such objectives were in accordance to the key policy issues that were formulated by OECD for Poland in order to improve quality and equity of the system of education in Poland (OECD 2015).

Following the demise of socialist regimes in 1989, Poland underwent significant transformations in political, social, cultural and economic spheres. These changes laid the foundation for a comprehensive overhaul of the Polish education system. Transitioning from a centrally planned, hierarchical and closed educational system, Poland's education system evolved into a more open and highly decentralised governance structure (Herbst and Levitas 2012).

Reforms

Rapid reforms in the phase: Transition and Integration Era (1990–2004) were driven by the need to align Poland's education system with European standards and modernise its practices. During the time 1990 to 2004, the focus was on overhauling the educational framework to improve quality and expand access. The challenges included adapting to new policies and ensuring that adequate support and resources were available to implement these changes (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

The early 1990s were marked by the decentralisation of the education system and efforts to integrate international best practices into teacher training. The 1991 Education Act (O Systemie oświaty 1991) was a crucial piece of legislation that restructured the management of schools, transferring many responsibilities from the central government to local authorities. This act aimed to increase the autonomy of schools, allowing for more localised and context-specific approaches to education, including teacher training. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw further efforts to integrate Poland's education system with broader European structures. Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 was a pivotal moment, bringing new opportunities and challenges for the education sector. EU membership necessitated compliance with European educational standards and practices, which included enhancing teacher education programmes.

New legislation has served as the cornerstone for changes in education. The primary legal foundation underpinning both the school education and higher education systems is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (The Constitution of the Republic of Poland 1997). Polish education policy has been significantly shaped by extensive interactions and partnerships with Western counterparts and prominent international organisations. These influential entities include the Council of Europe, the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank (Białecki, Jakubowski, and Wiśniewski 2017). Since 2004, when Poland became a member of the European Union, education policy in the country has been elevated to a priority on the reform agenda.

According to Article70 of the Constitution, every individual possesses the right to education, which is compulsory until the age of 18. Education in public schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) is free of charge. The Constitution guarantees that public authorities ensure universal and equitable access to education. To achieve this, they provide financial and organisational support to pupils and students. Parents retain the freedom to select a school for their children. Furthermore, both citizens and institutions possess the right to establish primary and post-primary schools, as well as the Higher Education Institutions and childcare centres, which are granted a degree of autonomy.

The Educational System Act enacted on 7 September 1991 (O Systemie oświaty 1991) paved the way for the establishment of non-state schools across all levels of education. It also brought about changes in the structure of enrolment at the upper secondary level, resulting in higher percentage of young people attending general secondary schools. Additionally, it led to a doubling in the number of students enrolling in universities and the other higher education institutions (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

The reform of the State administration system in 1999, coupled with subsequent education structural reforms after 1999, resulted in the devolution of all duties and responsibilities relating to the administration of education and the running of schools, pre-school institutions and other educational establishments to the local

level. Under this decentralisation process, the central government retained sole responsibility for national educational policy. The fundamental objective behind the decentralisation of education in Poland from its inception was to allocate roles and functions between the government and local authorities: the central government maintained its responsibility for the overarching educational policy and process, including the assurance the quality of education), while local governments assumed the roles of managing and directly funding educational provision and infrastructure. The school reforms introduced on this basis marked a significant shift of decision-making authority from the central to the local level in Poland – particularly in matters related to financing and restructuring (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

Impact on teacher education

Teacher education itself underwent major reforms during this period. The emphasis shifted towards improving the quality of teacher education, incorporating new pedagogical approaches, and addressing the needs of a more democratic and diverse society. Teacher education programmes began to reflect a greater emphasis on active learning, critical thinking, and practical training, while striving to balance the legacy of the previous system with the demands of modernisation (Michalak 2005). Several key initiatives were implemented to improve teacher education during this period. Universities and pedagogical institutions expanded their programmes to include more comprehensive training in modern teaching methods, foreign languages, and information technology. There was also a focus on fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students, moving away from rote memorisation techniques prevalent during the communist era. Professional development for in-service teachers became a priority, with numerous workshops, seminars, and training programmes being introduced. These programmes were designed to keep teachers updated on the latest educational trends and methodologies, ensuring they could effectively meet the needs of a rapidly changing student population (Gołębniak 1997).

The decentralisation of education introduced by the 1999 reform extended beyond the administration of schools and institutions; it also had a profound impact on teacher training. With local governments now responsible for managing educational provision, they gained greater autonomy in shaping teacher education programmes. This shift allowed local authorities to tailor training initiatives to meet the specific needs of their regional schools, fostering more flexible and context-sensitive approaches to teacher preparation. While the central government-maintained oversight of national educational policy and quality assurance, local governments became instrumental in the practical delivery and funding of teacher education, marking a significant change in the training landscape (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

In summary, the period from 1990 to 2004 was one of profound change and modernisation for teacher education in Poland. The transition from a centralised, state-controlled system to a more decentralised, autonomous, and European-aligned framework brought significant improvements in the quality and professionalisation of teacher training. These reforms were essential in preparing Polish teachers to educate future generations in a democratic and increasingly globalised society.

Phase 3: the modernisation and reform era (2005–2024)

Starting from 2005, the Modernisation and Reform Era marked a comprehensive approach to enhancing the quality of teacher education and aligning it with global educational trends. The objectives during this phase included integrating innovative teaching methods, utilising technology effectively, and fostering a culture of continuous professional development. This era focused on addressing gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application and responding to both national and transnational educational reforms. The introduction of evidence-based practices and a commitment to both national and international standards characterised this phase, reflecting an ongoing effort to modernise and elevate the standards of teacher education.

The achievements in Polish education noted in the first two decades of the 21st century (OECD 2015) can be attributed to a series of reforms that began in 1990. These reforms challenged nearly every aspect of the education and higher education system, encompassing structural changes, governance and funding mechanisms, curriculum organisation in school education, admissions policies, assessment practices, supervision, accreditation processes, certification procedures, student support services, education for foreign nationals, teacher qualification requirements, employment conditions, and professional advancement opportunities for both school and academic educators, and researchers. The system of education has been constructed in such a way that it is intended to enable learners to adapt to a rapidly changing world, especially to adapt to the pace and scope of economic, social and cultural change (Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

Impact on teacher education

The dynamic evolution of education and higher education over the past three decades has brought about significant changes in relevant legislation, serving as the foundation for introducing important reforms in teacher education to make it more adapted to the challenges of the contemporary world. Initial teacher education institutions have gained autonomy, replacing centrally prescribed curricula with more flexible approaches, and adapting both their teaching methodologies and content of study to meet changing needs. All teacher educational institutions operate in both the public and non-public education sectors.

Since 2005 Poland, like its European counterparts, has placed significant emphasis on addressing numerous policy matters related to the quality of teacher education. This commitment aligns with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA. Substantial advancements have been achieved in the area of quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines such as qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of the use of learning outcomes, the promotion of high-quality learning and teaching, the promotion of lifelong learning, or the mobility of students, teachers and researchers. Nevertheless, it is essential to reflect on and underscore both the achievements and the challenges encountered in pursuing the fundamental goals of the Bologna Process. There is a need to look carefully at teacher education as a critical issue, recognising it as a vital concern in light of the intricate and evolving role that teachers play in society. The expectations placed on teachers for delivering high quality education are substantial. Therefore, there is a growing consensus on the desirability of creating

a European Teacher Education Area, in parallel to European Higher Education Area. This recognition emphasis the need to address the specific nuances of teacher education in Europe, taking into account the unique demands and responsibilities faced by teachers.

In response to international influences and evolving educational paradigms, Poland has witnessed the emergence of competence-based approaches within teacher education. This shift extends not only to initial teacher education but encompasses the entire continuum of a teacher's career. Teacher competence frameworks have been introduced recently and they specify what candidates for teachers should know, understand and be able to do in the form of 'learning outcomes'. These frameworks provide a detailed description of the skills and competencies that teacher should possess.

Initial Teacher Education – The Degree Programmes, Models and Teaching Placements: In Poland, from 1990 to 2015, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) was provided within two sectors of the education system: the higher education sector and the school education sector. The degree programmes, including first-, second- and long-cycle programmes, were offered within university type HEIs, namely in universities, technical universities, polytechnics and academies. The school education sector offered the college programmes, including teacher training colleges and foreign language teacher training colleges. Concurrently, the school education sector provided college programmes, which encompassed teacher training colleges and foreign language teacher training colleges. However, starting from 2015, ITE has transitioned exclusively to HEIs, consolidating its provision within this sector.

In the present regulations, as outlined in the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education (2019) dated 25 July 2019, concerning the training standards for the teaching profession (published in the Official Journal of Laws in 2021, Dz.U. 2021, item 890), the preparation to practice the profession of: is provided in first- and second-cycle studies, uniform master's studies (pre-school and early childhood education, special pedagogy) and postgraduate studies. The regulations refer to: 1) a subject teacher, theoretical vocational subjects, practical vocational training, classroom teacher and psychologist teacher; 2) a kindergarten and early childhood education teacher (grades I-III of primary school); and 3) a teacher of special educator, speech therapist and early childhood development support teacher.

Teacher training comprises several components, including content-related preparation for teaching specific subjects, as well as and psychological-pedagogical and didactic training. The latter includes fundamental aspects of didactics, voice projection, and didactic preparation for teaching the specific subject. Part of this training involves work placements, with the primary objective of enabling students to gain experience related to teaching and educational work. These work placements provide students with an opportunity to apply their acquired knowledge of teaching and confront it with the actual pedagogical reality within the classroom. If the subject is taught in both primary and secondary schools, in-service training takes place in both types of school.

In the current context the minimum qualification for teaching at pre-primary and primary level (the first stage: grades 1–3) is still a tertiary education degree at bachelor level, which lasts three years. However, according to the new regulations, the master's degree will be required in the forthcoming years. For those intending to work at primary schools (the second stage: grades 4–8), and at upper secondary level, the final qualification is a master's degree. It is worth mentioning that teachers are one of the most educated professional groups in Poland. They constitute 1.8% of the entire population

of Poles, and 2.7% of the professionally active population – almost three out of 100 employed are teachers working in the official education system (Madalińska-Michalak 2021). The teaching profession is dominated by teachers with higher education qualifications: bachelor's and master's degrees (97.5%). In addition, 0.8% of teachers (5,500 people) had a doctorate or habilitation, 0.9% had post-secondary education, 0.5% secondary and 0.2% other.

Initial teacher education follows two primary models: the concurrent model and the consecutive model. *The concurrent* model of ITE is the predominant approach in the country. Teachers who are being prepared to teach at the ISCED 0 level and grades 1–3 of ISCED 1 received their training exclusively through the concurrent model.

Teaching placements in Poland are structured into two main categories: (i) mid-year placements (general academic placement, including educational and teaching placement), and (ii) continuous placements. The implementation of mid-year placements is closely aligned with theoretical and methodological classes within the teacher education programme. These apprenticeships occur in schools where the future teacher is expected to eventually assume a teaching position. Teaching placements are conducted in a real working environments, and constitute a mandatory component of professional training within ITE programmes. Practical training is integrated at various stages of the ITE programme. It is supervised by a mentor (usually a teacher in the school where the training occurs). Regular assessments of the trainee's performance are conducted by educators affiliated with the ITE institution to ensure effective pedagogical development. The minimum requirement for professional training for future pre-primary teachers (ISCED 0), primary teachers (ISCED 1) and lower secondary teachers (ISCED 2) amounts to 13.8% of the programme. However, the minimum requirement for professional training for future upper secondary teachers (ISCED 3) amounts to less than 10% of the programme (usually it is around 8,3%). This proportion of professional training for upper secondary teachers in Poland is quite low compared with the average amount of around 20% in the majority of EU countries.

Admission to Initial Teacher Education: Admission to initial teacher education is governed by the general entrance requirements for entry to tertiary education rather than by specific selection criteria for teacher education. The main prerequisite is to hold the final upper secondary examination certificate. For access to master's programmes, the performance at bachelor level is considered. Alternative pathways to a teaching qualification are rare in Poland and are only available for future foreign language teachers. They were introduced because of the shortage of qualified foreign language teachers and the urgent need for their recruitment. In order to become a language teacher in this way it is necessary to obtain a certificate confirming language skills at 'proficient' or 'advanced' levels as well as a certificate in foreign language teaching awarded upon the completion of a non-degree, postgraduate programme or a qualification course. The lack of specific recruitment criteria for prospective teachers and no monitoring of the suitability of candidates for the teaching profession during education is one of the main concerns of current policy reforms in teacher education in Poland. In 2017, a report from The Supreme Audit Office highlighted trend of negative selection for the teaching profession in Poland dating back to the academic year 2012/2013 (NIK 2017). This issue is compounded by the fact that the admission requirements and process for ITE generally do not address essential skills or competences of candidates. These competences may include

interpersonal competences, prior experience working with children through volunteering (e.g. in a scout team or an artistic or tourist group), or competences demonstrated by candidates in after-school programmes or through self-education.

Teacher Career Advancement and Induction: As of 1 September 2022, new regulations for teacher career advancement came into force, replacing the 2000 regulations. The 2000 framework had a four-stage progression: Trainee teacher (nauczyciel stażysta), Contract teacher (nauczyciel kontraktowy), Appointed teacher (nauczyciel mianowany), and Chartered teacher (nauczyciel dyplomowany). The 2022 regulations streamlined this structure into three stages: Novice teacher (nauczyciel początkujący), Appointed teacher (nauczyciel mianowany), and Chartered teacher (nauczyciel dyplomowany). The trainee and contract teacher stages were abolished. The new regulations shift away from formalised internships, focusing more on the acquisition of practical skills. Both the old and new systems provide vertical advancement for teachers who enhance their qualifications and work quality, as well as horizontal promotion opportunities within schools, such as roles like mentor, subject team leader, or educational team leader. The primary goal of these promotion structures is to encourage continuous professional improvement.

The 2022 regulations on teacher career advancement maintain the national induction scheme introduced in 2000, which supports newly qualified teachers in their first years of teaching. This induction phase is a comprehensive support programme where novice teachers perform the same tasks as experienced teachers and are remunerated for their work. It includes formative and supportive components, providing additional training, personalised help, and advice at the school. The school-based induction programme highlights the ongoing need for professional development and support for new teachers, emphasising the responsibility of established teachers to mentor newcomers (Rzońca and Madalińska-Michalak 2023). Its goal is to help beginning teachers build their professional identity and develop practices suited to the realities of the classroom. The induction period encourages new teachers to be proactive and innovative rather than merely implementing others' ideas or practices. The recent research indicates the significance of adopting constructivist mentoring models to optimise the effectiveness of mentoring programmes in school settings (Rzońca and Madalińska-Michalak 2023).

Continuing Professional Development: In Poland, in-service training or continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers is encouraged and supported by legislation, though not mandatory. Teachers are expected to continually expand their knowledge and skills to enhance their professional development. The career advancement process includes an assessment of the teacher's achievements based on a professional development plan. There are two main strands of CPD activities: further training, which includes programmes and courses for higher level or additional qualifications, and in-service training, which focuses on improving working methods (e.g. teaching methodology or ICT courses). Further training is provided by HEIs through part-time degree and non-degree postgraduate programmes. In-service training is mainly offered by in-service teacher training institutions, with some opportunities available through HEIs.

CPD is divided into complementary education, which leads to higher or additional qualifications, and staff development, which upgrades existing skills. Complementary education covers courses leading to higher education levels or additional qualifications, while staff development focuses on enhancing teaching techniques within existing qualifications. The Teachers' Charter (Karta Nauczyciela 1982) guarantees funding for

CPD, allocating 2.5% of the planned expenditure on teachers' salaries from the state budget, with potential increases from local authorities, donations, and sponsors. Over the years, CPD has become crucial in Poland and is linked to career progression.

In the TALIS 2013 study (OECD 2014), teachers indicated the types of professional development they participated in and the intensity of their involvement. Polish teachers most commonly attended improvement courses (81%), conferences (52%), collaborative networks (41%), mentoring (45%), and individual or group research (38%). Certified and appointed teachers had higher participation in courses, while contract teachers more often engaged in mentoring. Teachers with over 30 years of experience participated more frequently in research. Overall participation rates ranged from 88% to 90%, with Polish figures at 95% in primary schools, 94% in lower secondary schools, and 93% in upper secondary schools.

The diversity of professional development also extends to content. The most interest was shown in subject knowledge and pedagogical competencies, with Polish teachers reporting rates of 62% and 57%. Teachers under 30 were more likely to participate in sessions about the curriculum, while those with longer experience focused more on working with students with special needs. Additionally, topics related to the curriculum, student assessment, and the use of computer techniques were of significant interest among teachers (48% to 54%). In Poland, there was a particular focus on training for working with students with special educational needs and individualised instruction (54% and 49%, compared to TALIS averages of 28% and 36%). The Ministry of Education's policies, including support for students with special needs, have increased interest in relevant training. The curriculum reform has also sparked interest in the new curriculum framework. The TALIS study indicated the high level of participation of Polish teachers in CPD (OECD 2014). However, the quality of teachers' professional development has been questioned (Fazlagic 2012).

Summary and conclusions

The evolution of teacher education in Poland from 1970 to 2024 reflects the broader socio-political and economic transformations that have shaped the country's educational landscape. The analysis of the three distinct phases – the Socialist Era and Transition, the and Integration Era, and the Modernisation and Reform Era – reveals significant shifts in policy development, legislative changes, and the resulting challenges and achievements. During the Socialist Era, centralised control and ideological rigidity ensured uniformity but stifled creativity and innovation in teacher education. The subsequent Transition and Integration Era saw rapid reforms aimed at decentralisation and alignment with European standards, though these changes brought challenges such as resistance to change and inadequate funding. The Modernisation and Reform Era focused on quality improvement and integrating international best practices, promoting innovation and the use of technology in education.

During the Socialist Era, centralised control and ideological rigidity ensured uniformity but stifled creativity and innovation in teacher education. The 1989 report 'Education as a National Priority' identified critical issues within this system, such as its inability to adapt to rapid economic, social, and cultural changes, the crisis in educational roles due to a focus on information transmission and collective education, and the narrow vocational

education system that primarily prepared workers for state-owned industrial jobs. Additionally, there were significant disparities in access to education and low completion rates for secondary and higher education.

The subsequent Transition and Integration Era saw rapid reforms aimed at decentralisation and alignment with European standards. These changes were driven by the need to adapt the education system to new constitutional provisions and state reforms. This period emphasised the importance of establishing closer links between schools, families, and local communities. However, these reforms brought challenges such as resistance to change, inadequate funding, and the difficulty of balancing state control with academic freedom.

The Modernisation and Reform Era focused on quality improvement and integrating international best practices, promoting innovation, and using technology in education.

Key lessons from these phases include the importance of continuous professional development, the integration of international best practices, and the necessity of addressing resource disparities and policy execution challenges.

Future reforms should aim to further decentralise education, enhance resource allocation, and promote lifelong learning for teachers. Emphasising the integration of technology, especially the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in educational context (see: Recommendation CM/Rec (2019) 10 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education), and fostering innovation will be crucial for developing a more flexible and responsive educational environment. By building on the lessons learned from past experiences, Poland can continue to improve the quality and effectiveness of its teacher education system, ultimately benefiting the broader educational landscape.

In conclusion, the historical analysis and current challenges highlight the complexity of reforming teacher education in Poland. Future policy and practice should focus on decentralisation, resource enhancement, and lifelong learning. Further research should explore the impacts of technological integration and innovative practices on teacher education to ensure continued progress in this critical area.

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