

Policy brief: Addressing Poland's teacher shortage: Are wage increases enough?

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Abstract

Teachers in Poland have experienced a great deal of adversity over the last 10 years, from the overturning of evidence informed reforms, low wages, and an influx of non-Polish speaking Ukrainian students. As such, the teaching profession has struggled to attract new staff and retain current staff, contributing to a growing teacher shortage. This paper highlights most attempts to mitigate teacher shortages are isolated on wage growth. Analysis shows whilst wage growth is essential to staff satisfaction and professional status, failing to address other contributing factors, such as increasing workloads, limits success. As such, two recommendations are offered as a starting point to combat the growing shortages; however, their success is questionable because of decisions made by the then ruling right-wing government (2015-23). This poses a serious matter that the recently sworn in coalition government must address.

Keywords: Education, intersectionality, Poland, populism, teacher shortages

Introduction

Poland's education system has undergone notable change over the last few decades. One such result of these changes is a shortage of current and prospective teachers due to diverse and interconnected influences. Despite diverse influences, increasing teacher pay is often discussed in isolation and seen as an easy fix to what is a complex matter. This paper ascertains that whilst increasing wages is an important first step, policymakers and the public must address the intersection of influence impacting teachers to effectively mitigate shortages.

The Polish context

Post World War II, Poland's education system emulated Soviet-socialist values and content (Piwowarski, 2015). The governments' centralised educational control began to dissipate in the early 1990's due to concerning rates of secondary completion and to meet the evolving needs of young people, with local governing bodies gaining increased influence within their respective communities (Piwowarski, 2015). This led to the introduction of non-public schools and the strengthening of vocational tracks, whilst also improving secondary student success as more young people became eligible to enter universities (Piwowarski, 2015). Fast-forward briefly, and Poland's educational reform of 1999 restructured national schooling by reducing the length of primary education to introduce lower-secondary schools and delaying their tracking process by one year (Wiśniewski & Zahorska, 2020). Additionally, capability approaches (i.e., focussing on skills such as problem-solving) and modernised content were

implemented and believed to be key contributors to Poland's repeated improvement in PISA over three testing cycles (Wiśniewski & Zahorska, 2020). However, these reforms were overturned in 2015 by the ruling right-wing government to the dismay of education stakeholders (Karwowski & Milerski, 2021).

Whilst only a brief outline of events over the past 40 years, they underline some of the key changes in the Polish education system. However, despite continued attempts to improve education for students, teachers were neglected. As such, Poland currently faces teacher shortages due to many interrelated factors, including but not limited to; poor wages (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EECEA], 2022), increased workloads (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020), declining status (Piwowarski, 2015), and global events (i.e., the war in Ukraine and subsequent inflation). Consequently, Poland has many unfilled jobs, especially impacting non-metropolitan schools and disadvantaged students (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020). As staffing shortages worsen there are increased calls to raise teacher wages to better align with inflation and attract and retain staff (ZNP, 2023). Undoubtedly, raising teacher pay is an important starting point, but is it enough?

Why is it important to address shortages holistically?

Whilst issues perpetuating teacher shortages in Poland are multifaceted and interconnected, low income is often mentioned first as Poland ranks amongst the lowest earners (within teaching) in the EU (EECEA, 2022), even when adjusting for the cost of living. Not only does poor pay limit teachers' ease of living but it also contributes to the diminishing status of the profession (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020). Once a historically prestigious role (Fizman, 1973), current negative societal perceptions are leading to scores of young people disinterested in teaching (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020). In addition to low wages and declining status, workloads are increasing to continue the nation's success on international tests (Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2015). As Steżycka and Etherington (2020) highlight, increased work responsibilities often trickle into teachers' personal lives, impacting their work-life balance and contributing to decreased motivation and job satisfaction.

In conjunction with the issues outlined above is the influence of recent major global events. Across the EU, Poland received the largest share of refugees fleeing Ukraine in 2022 (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2022). Estimations suspect close to 1.5 million Ukrainians were residing in Poland as of May 2022 (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2022). Not surprisingly, an influx of Ukrainian students stretches Poland's already thin workforce and exacerbates influential factors, such as class size and language delivery. These factors highlight a critical point in Polish educational policy as urgent action is needed to address shortages immediately, and to best prepare for future challenges. Without reasonable action it is likely current and future schools will not sufficiently staffed (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020) which disproportionately affects disadvantaged students (i.e., those with a lower socioeconomic status), minority population groups, and rural communities (Karwowski & Milerski, 2021), reinforcing social inequities and minimising social mobility.

What we know about shortages in Poland

Complex intersections of influences cause teacher shortages. Whilst certain factors receive widespread attention, such as increasing wages, others do not. This creates an oversimplification of the matter and sees many influential factors neglected for the 'easy fix' (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020). Consequently, most of policymakers' and the ZNP's (Poland's largest teachers union) attention is focused on improving wages (ZNP, 2023). Ensuring teachers earn a liveable wage is unequivocally important; however, pay is often promoted at the expense of other factors, such as reducing high workloads, which may limit the impact of increased pay on teacher attraction and retention. Additionally, focusing solely on wages does little to address the influx of Ukrainian refugee students, many of whom cannot speak Polish (Chmielewska-Kalińska, 2022). The challenge for policymakers in this instance is to view the issue of teacher shortages holistically, not segmentally and address it as such (Karwowski & Milerski, 2021).

Whilst policymakers and the ZNP engage in wage discussions, academics already allude to complex networks of influence. In Piróg and Hibszer's (2015) analysis of Polish geography teachers in the labour market, they explore many of the cultural, economic, and social influences combining to discourage young people from becoming teachers, especially in 'less important' learning areas, namely geography. Whilst pay is an important aspect in their paper, the authors reiterate it is only one component of a network of influencers. Whilst they focus on geography teachers their findings pertain to other 'less important' learning areas, such as the arts. Similarly, and more recently, Stężycka and Etherington (2020) found the interplay of many factors, including wages, workload, and a lack of recognition strongly demotivates English language (EFL) teachers. Together, Piróg and Hibszer (2015) and Stężycka and Etherington (2020) begin to paint a clear picture of the importance to address influences on teacher shortages holistically.

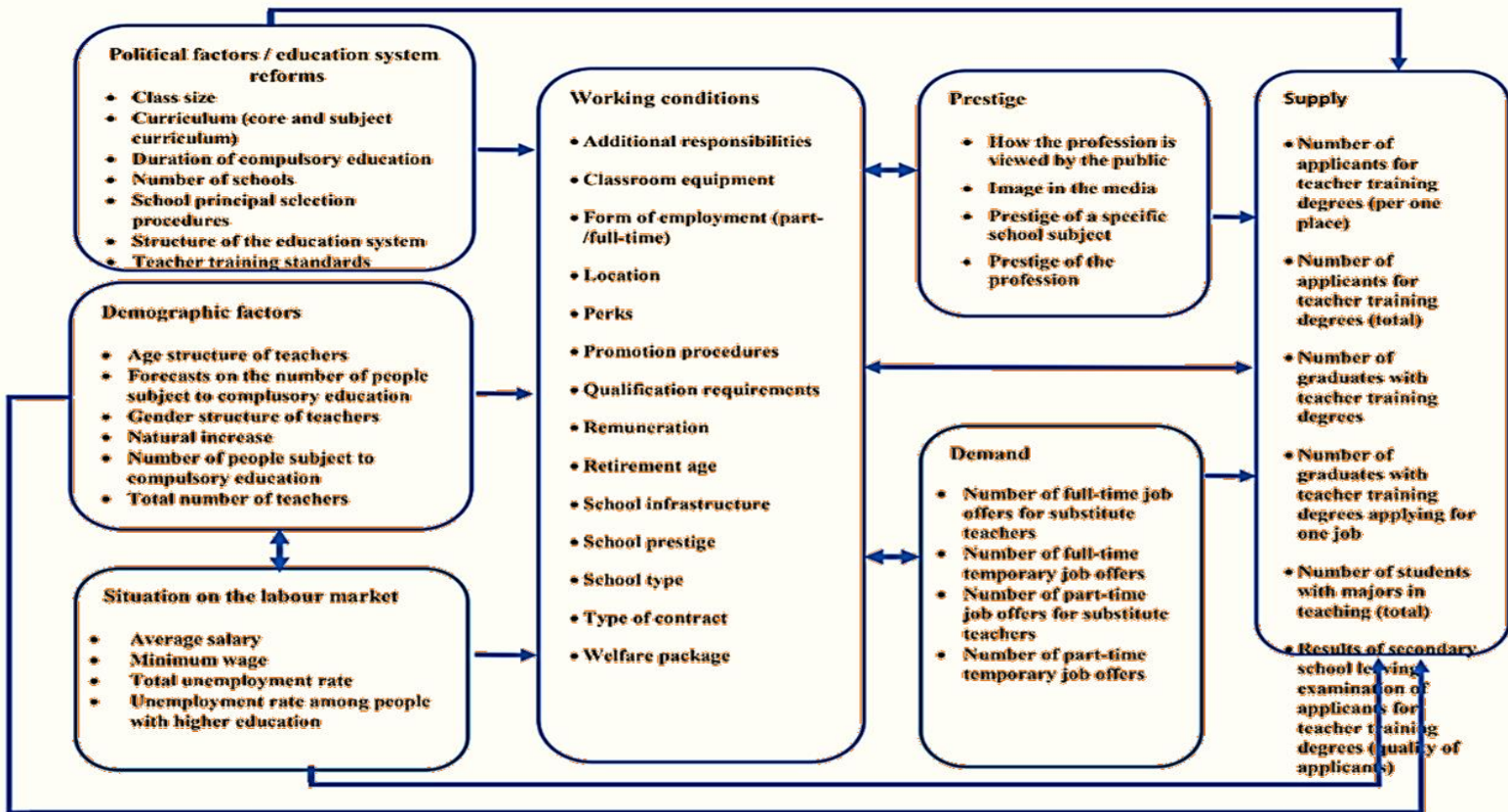
However, the current political landscape presents a key challenge for this line of thinking and action. Specifically, decisions made by the previous ruling right-wing government (2015-23) appeared to be politically driven, rather than educationally. For instance, the then government overturned the reform of 1999 in 2015 without sufficient evidence supporting its abolishment (Karwowski & Milerski, 2021), leading to widespread teacher dissatisfaction and protests. Consequently, educational priorities reverted to 'traditional' and nationalistic views (i.e., on the Polish language and history) at the expense of globalised curriculum and a capabilities approach, despite crediting Poland's growing success in PISA (Karwowski & Milerski, 2021) to these approaches. So, despite academics clearly illuminating an interplay of influences, they have largely been disregarded.

Why do shortages persist?

As mentioned previously, Polish wages are amongst the lowest in the EU and, justly, receive most of the political attention. This is not surprising, given that low wages are discussed in both Piróg and Hibszer (2015) and Stężycka and Etherington (2020), and are shown to be a pivotal influence. Mojsa-Kaja et al. (2015) concurs with Piróg and Hibszer (2015) and Stężycka and Etherington (2020) whilst further elaborating on the influence of personal factors. Mojsa-Kaja et al. (2015) found teachers experiencing multiple ill factors were more likely to experience burnout and leave the profession than those experiencing one ill factor. Whilst pay is explored in the study, the

intersectionality of several influences takes precedence, highlighting the need to address multiple spheres of influence in the profession. The purpose of this brief is not to identify every influential factor impacting teachers; however, an overview of the interconnectivity and vastness of factors impacting teachers in Poland can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors impacting teacher attraction and retention in Poland



Source: Piróg and Hibszer, 2020.

Alternatively, in Mojsa-Kaja et al.’s (2015) study of 205 teachers, they found pay was less influential on staff in positive working arrangements, especially for people with high work satisfaction. Stężycka and Etherington (2020) agree, as their study involving 37 EFL teachers found self-fulfilment to be a key motivating factor, despite the stress caused by low pay. Again, these studies acknowledge the impact of pay whilst emphasising the need and benefit of addressing teacher shortages holistically. Whilst teacher pay is undeniably contributing to teacher shortages, it is apparent increases are not enough to adequately address teachers concerns.

Polish policymakers are aware of the need to raise teacher salaries. According to figures published by EECEA (2022), teacher wages increased approximately 14% between 2015 and 2021 Whilst an obvious move in the right direction, salary growth remained lower than the national inflation rate for most of 2022 and 2023 (EECEA, 2022), renewing the ZNP’s call for wage increases of 20% (ZNP, 2023). Additionally, despite wage increases, teachers in Poland are still paid substantially less than in most nations in the EU. Considering close to 80% of teachers have a higher level of educational attainment than required (EECEA, 2022), links can be drawn to growing dissatisfaction and feelings of underappreciation, as outlined by Mojsa-Kaja et al.

(2015). This is a clear example of the intersection of influences, as teachers in Poland are highly trained (EECEA, 2022), overworked (Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2015), underpaid (Stężycka & Etherington, 2020) and increasingly dissatisfied (Piróg & Hibszer, 2020). In this instance, raising wages somewhat alleviated monetary stress but did little to mitigate other influences.

Furthermore, decisions made by the then ruling political party contributed to shortages, which is likely to have ongoing effects. Specifically, an increase in populism and nationalistic policy drove reversion reforms. Reverting to 'tradition' discourages young people from choosing a career in education, argue Wiśniewski and Zahorska (2020). They suggest Poland's past-oriented tendencies are not appealing to young people living in a highly globalised context as the system no longer aligns with their values or experiences. Similarly, the rise of nationalistic content may encourage established teachers to change careers. Karwowski and Milerski (2021) explain the largest portion of citizens opposing the government's overturning the 1999 reform and subsequent curriculum changes were those with higher education degrees, who make up 80% of the teaching profession (EECEA, 2022). A mismatch between personal beliefs and the work environment contributes to staff burnout and dissatisfaction, according to Mojsa-Kaja et al. (2015), as staff experience a loss of purpose. Again, even though wage increases may alleviate some pressure on teachers, shortages will persist if the intersection of influence and other factors are not addressed.

Recommendations for addressing teacher shortages in Poland

Two recommendations are drawn from the analysed literature. Firstly, significant wage increases are needed to incentivise young people to join the profession and retain current staff. Whilst this paper ascertains wage increases alone are not enough, low pay is consistently referenced (Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2015; Piróg & Hibszer, 2020; Stężycka & Etherington, 2020) and as such, increases in line with inflation are a pivotal starting point to address shortages and potentially improve the status of teaching. Despite not being explored in this paper due to constraints, there are a variety of contextual factors affecting if, and how much of an increase is possible. Consequently, the likelihood and ease of implementing further wage increases is difficult to gauge in the current political landscape with the changing of government in 2023. Therefore, addressing factors such working conditions and workload may be a more feasible strategy. Nonetheless, Polish teachers are highly educated and dedicated and deserve to be compensated accordingly.

Secondly, it is vital to reframe the way policymakers and the public view the issue of teacher shortages. Throughout this paper, the intersectional influences impacting teacher shortages were explored and it is evident that multiple factors must be addressed to best mitigate the issue. This moves beyond pay and considers aspects outlined in Figure 2. To do so, government officials and policymakers must meet with academics and relevant stakeholders to map out an appropriate course of action. Reinstating the reform of 1999 is the most obvious starting point for the new Polish government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst wage increases are a crucial step in easing some pressure associated with teacher shortages, they simply are not enough. The intersection of influence is far too broad to be resolved by a single action; therefore, it must be addressed holistically. In addition, wage increases have done little to address factors exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and changing political climate, further highlighting the need to reframe policymakers and the public's understanding of the issue so meaningful change is enacted.

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