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Policy brief: Addressing teacher attrition in Poland's general education through Lortie's framework

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Abstract

The Polish education system has achieved remarkable success since joining the European Union in 2004, as seen by rapidly improving PISA scores and a highly qualified teaching force. However, despite these achievements, the system faces a great challenge of teacher shortages. New teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates, while the existing workforce is strained by an ageing demographic and mass retirements. The primary drivers of teacher attrition are non-financial, including excessive administrative workloads, diminished professional autonomy, and unmet emotional needs. This policy brief examines the underlying reasons for teacher attrition in Poland through Lortie's theoretical framework of presentism, conservatism, and individualism. The recommendations include diversifying pathways to higher education, rebalancing subject weightings beyond numeracy and literacy, slowing the pace of educational reforms while increasing teacher participation in policy-making, and restructuring continuing professional development to facilitate meaningful collaboration among educators.

Keywords: educational reforms, education policy, Poland, teacher shortage

Introduction

Since regaining independence in 1989 and joining the European Union in 2004, Poland has implemented multiple rounds of educational reforms (Wiśniewski & Zahorska, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that these reforms have been largely successful in improving Polish education: Since 2000, Poland's PISA performances have risen from below the OECD average to ranking among the highest in Europe (Jakubowski, 2021), and 98% of Polish teachers now hold a bachelor's or master's degree (Craig, 2016). The education system has played a crucial role in Poland's economic growth in the 21st century by supplying a highly skilled workforce. However, the system continues to face critical challenges, including teacher shortages, student wellbeing concerns, and the limited competitiveness of VET graduates in the labour market. These interconnected problems impact the economic and social environment beyond the education system.

Teacher shortage is a pressing global concern (Wiggin et al., 2021), and Poland is no exception. Currently, 45,000 teachers in service are over retirement age, representing 7% of the teaching force (European Commission, 2023). According to the Polish Press Agency (2024), Poland is currently experiencing a shortage of 15,000 teachers. Structural changes in school staffing and institutional downsizing are projected to result in 100,000 teacher layoffs within the next two to three years, further worsening the crisis.

As Barber and Mourshed (2007, p. 19) state, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.” That is to say, the availability of a sufficient number of highly qualified teachers directly determines the quality of an education system. As the only school-related variable directly linked to student achievement (Savage & Lewis, 2017), teacher shortages can have a profoundly negative impact on education in Poland.

Specifically, the teacher shortage for general subjects such as Polish language and mathematics needs to be addressed immediately, especially at the secondary school level. General education has been the focus of Polish education reform since 1990: Students’ decisions on pathways were delayed, and VET schools were closed to achieve an 80% share of general education (Kust, 2020). Therefore, this sector now includes the majority of students at this stage. However, the abolition of lower secondary schools in 1999 has resulted in a significant number of unemployed teachers at this level (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2023), further exacerbating the issue. Currently, approximately 58% of teachers of general subjects across Poland’s 380 districts face either a “shortage of job seekers” or a “great shortage of job seekers” (Barometr Zawodów, n.d.).

Teacher shortages can be caused by both insufficient entry of young professionals into the field and inadequate retention of experienced educators. This brief primarily analyses the issue from the perspective of teacher attrition, focusing on teachers’ working conditions and emotional factors in their careers. The aim is to explore potential policy improvements to retain teachers in the profession and alleviate the shortage in Poland.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to provide recommendations to Małgorzata Szybalska, Director of the Department of General Education, Ministry of National Education in Poland, on improving teacher retention at the secondary school level through policy adjustments that enhance career satisfaction. These changes aim to mitigate teacher shortages in Poland’s general education sector by improving educators’ wellbeing.

What do we know

The 1990s education reforms introduced numerous provisions for teachers. Those wishing to teach in pre-primary or primary schools were required to have at least a Bachelor’s degree, while those aiming to teach in secondary schools needed at least a Master’s degree in respective teaching fields (Onyefulu et al., 2022). Teaching degrees are subject-specific, and all teachers are required to complete pedagogical training in their respective disciplines (e.g., biology, mathematics). Between 1989 and 1991, teachers were granted greater autonomy over curriculum development, textbook selection, and instructional resources. From 2000 until its restructuring into two levels in 2022, the Polish teacher promotion system comprised four professional ranks (Valenčič Zuljan & Marentič Požarnik, 2014). Additionally, all teachers must participate in Continuing Professional Development (CPD), though in-service education remains optional (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2023).

Studies have shown that teachers leave the profession primarily due to poor working conditions and workload, as well as low incomes (Han et al., 2018). Low income is clearly a problem, but it is easier to address through direct financial interventions. Within the EU, Polish teachers rank among the bottom 10 for average earnings, facing low starting salaries and limited career advancement opportunities. Teachers in Poland earn 18.9% less than the national average for workers with tertiary education (European Commission, 2023). The newly elected Polish coalition government has pledged a 30% wage increase for teachers and approximately a 33% pay raise for entry-level educators (Polish Press Agency, 2024). However, improving teachers' working conditions and reducing their workload to prevent burnout is more complex and requires greater policy attention.

Given the intrinsic demands of teaching, working conditions and emotional fulfilment often outweigh financial rewards. Teaching is often perceived as a less attractive “semi-profession” or “mediocre profession” (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018), and financial incentives are not the primary reason teachers choose to enter or remain in the field. According to a cross-national study involving Polish teachers (Onyefulu et al., 2023), the top three motivations for teachers to choose and stay in the profession are a passion for education, a sense of achievement, and the enjoyment of working with pupils – factors outweighing external considerations like finances and holidays. As a result, insufficient emotional feedback increases the likelihood of teacher burnout and attrition (Charzyńska et al., 2021).

Critical analysis

This brief examines teachers' challenges and the role of policy in the Polish general education system using Lortie's theoretical framework. In *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (1975), Lortie identifies three tendencies among teachers: presentism, conservatism, and individualism. Andy Hargreaves (2010), in his analysis of this framework, refers to these biases as the “Unholy Trinity”: they hinder educational progress and diminish the moral rewards teachers can derive from their profession. A lack of this primary professional motivation and mental engagement can lead to teacher attrition.

Polish teachers exhibit a tendency toward presentism, a focus on immediate tasks and outcomes rather than long-term goals or broader principles. Reflecting the global trend of educational change (Sahlberg, 2023), Polish education increasingly stresses test scores and narrows the range of subjects. That is because students in the General Education sector must pass the Matura (Secondary School Leaving Examination) to access university. Additionally, the Polish curriculum prioritises the teaching of numeracy and literacy. In the 4-year general secondary school curriculum, subjects like Polish language, foreign languages, and mathematics constitute the majority of teaching hours out of 16 subjects offered in total (Eurydice, n.d.). The impact of these emphases is shown in the rapid rise of Poland's scores on numeracy and literacy exams in the PISA test since 2000 (Jakubowski, 2021). However, the obsession with marks and data has increasingly turned educational assessment into an end in itself (Biesta, 2010). Meanwhile, other subjects and competencies essential for students, such as social ability, adaptability, and self-efficacy, are often overlooked due to their difficulty in quantifying. This trend of focusing narrowly on test scores and specific subjects heightens the pressure on teachers to perform, shifting their focus from making a meaningful impact on individual students to achieving high test scores.

Consequently, teachers may resort to more utilitarian teaching techniques for immediate and visible improvements in test results rather than long-term positive impacts. They might be tempted to use tactics like analysing question-writers' habits or predicting test questions instead of imparting structured knowledge. This affects students' intellectual development and psychological growth, and limits opportunities for teachers to form deep connections with them. Teachers who chose education out of passion often find their classrooms reduced to meaningless data-producing factories, turning them into mere data-processing robots.

On the other hand, radical educational policy reforms in Poland have led to a tendency toward conservatism among teachers (focus on small-scale improvement and reliance on traditional methods). While this tendency is common globally (Hargreaves, 2010), educational reforms in Poland are notably characterised by a top-down approach. These reforms have been ambitious, often overturning the existing schooling system within just a few years (Wiśniewski & Zahorska, 2020). In this process, the teaching profession and teacher education are increasingly regulated in detail by laws such as the *Teachers' Charter* (Kust, 2020; Eurydice, n.d.). However, higher-level policymakers are often disconnected from actual teaching practices, and teachers' participation in policy discussions is largely perfunctory. Teachers frequently feel overwhelmed by sudden, disruptive reforms and unattainable, idealised goals without having enough time to adjust to the changes (Jakubowski, 2021).

Education is an open system that constantly interacts with and evolves in response to the external environment (Biesta, 2010). The over-complexity of education policies almost inevitably leads to administrative difficulties and inefficiencies, as even the most elaborate regulations cannot fully account for the realities of education. The current detailed and intricate educational policy standards concerning teachers' work have made it even harder for teachers to promptly adapt to drastic changes and comply with all standards (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2023).

Consequently, teaching in Poland has developed a highly formalistic and bureaucratic character. Teachers are required to manage extensive paperwork and administrative tasks outside of their teaching responsibilities (Valenčič Zuljan & Marentič Požarnik, 2014). This adds to teachers' workload, further intensifying pressure to function within the standardised testing system. Conservatism and presentism have become increasingly intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Under such stress, teachers are more likely to rely on traditional pedagogies and familiar materials to avoid 'unnecessary' risks and energy investment. Teachers' creativity and enthusiasm gradually erode in striving to meet these policy standards. In addition, the lack of autonomy in the classroom diminishes the satisfaction teachers get from working with students, making them more vulnerable to burnout.

Finally, the nature of the teaching profession fosters a tendency toward individualism (conducted teaching in isolation from other teachers). This tendency is exacerbated rather than alleviated by current Polish education policies. As mentioned earlier, teachers are professionally motivated primarily by perceptual factors, such as a passion for education. Such experience is inherently individualistic and takes place within each teacher—student interaction in the classroom. As a result, teachers may be less inclined to cooperate or advocate for significant changes in how they teach if they perceive these efforts as irrelevant or even contradictory to their motivations. If not structured

effectively and inclusively, collective change and cooperation can be perceived as a threat to teachers' autonomy and thus resisted.

While the top-down development of educational policy in Poland has attempted to promote some level of teacher cooperation through Continuing Professional Development (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2023), such enforced collaboration often results in undesirable interpersonal tensions and additional workloads. This can lead to less meaningful cooperation and communication among disgruntled teachers. Collaboration results in a mere formality, further reinforcing bureaucratic rigidity and conservatism. Consequently, despite rapid policy changes and social and technological advancements, teachers' practices often remain static, leading to increased stress and reduced professional fulfilment. Rethinking how to effectively organize teachers and inspire them to engage in meaningful collaboration is key to addressing the issue of teacher individualism, while also improving both presentism and conservatism.

Policy recommendations

- Diversify students' pathways to higher education by reducing the reliance on standardised test scores and minimising the connection between teachers' performance indicators and test scores;
- Revise the weighting of subjects in external exams for compulsory and secondary education to promote a more balanced curriculum. Increase instructional time and extracurricular activities dedicated to arts, sciences, business, and social-emotional learning beyond numeracy and literacy subjects;
- Implement education reforms at a more measured pace to allow more time for careful policy evaluation. Ensure sustained representation of experienced, active teachers in educational legislative discussions to bridge the gap between policymakers and classroom realities. Establish a structural mechanism for teachers' unions to oversee policy revision and implementation. By valuing teachers' voices, policy complexity can be reduced, feasibility can be enhanced, and active teachers can be better prepared for the upcoming reforms;
- In CPD and professional training for teachers, facilitate discussions and collaboration on reducing assessment-related stress. Provide regular peer-to-peer cooperation opportunities such as joint lesson planning sessions. Encourage curriculum innovation both within and across schools, and establish a system to scale and share successful collaborative practices.

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