

SCHOOL FAILURE AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract. The author sketches the history of a longitudinal study on student failure in Poland conducted by a Polish educational sociologist, Zbigniew Kwieciński et al. Simultaneously, he provides a philosophical review of the study which took nearly three decades, starting in the early 1970s continuing through the fall of communism in Poland and the advent of liberal democracy. The findings of the longitudinal study are striking. They suggest that changes in the political system, in social and economic factors, in educational ideals and policies accompanied by different dominant philosophical paradigms, had no major effect in redressing school failure, or in reducing the numbers of socially excluded pupils. Having critically reviewed the research, its findings, philosophical interpretations, as well as the evolution of Kwieciński's views, the author highlights the significance of the role of the teacher in the complex dynamics of educational practice. He argues a case for substantial teacher responsibility, and for greater moral responsibility for the student.

In this paper I present a concise history and a philosophical review of an important body of research on failure in Polish schools from the early 1970s until the late 1990s. The research was carried out over this period by Zbigniew Kwieciński, a Polish sociologist of education, and his team. The research period covered different stages of recent Polish history: from the last years of communism, through the transformation period, until the beginning of liberal democracy. The most striking point in the research was that, in spite of the many social, political and cultural changes over the three decades, the numbers of pupils socially excluded because of underperformance or failure remained stable. Significant change was evident, not in students' achievements but in the dynamics of school selections, as well as in the philosophical interpretations brought to bear by the researchers in their analyses of failure.

The longitudinal approach adopted by Kwieciński involved not only investigating the level of educational achievement of pupils and its relevance to consecutive school choices; it also involved tracing the careers of the research populations as they developed fifteen and thirty years after graduation. School failure, as conceived by Kwieciński, has always been connected with the pupils' inability to participate in the mainstream culture due to their basic deficiencies in education, e.g. their poor understanding of written texts. Being unable to make sense of what they read, the pupils had a very limited access to symbolic culture and, as a result, they became prone to social exclusion. The full consequences of school failure, therefore, reveal themselves not only at school itself, but also in the years and decades after graduation. Kwieciński had never attempted to define the concept of school failure in an analytic way. For him what was indicative of such failure was the actual experience of socially excluded pupils viewed in contrast to their successful peers. Tracing the lives of both groups over a long period of time forcefully confirmed that the setbacks experienced by certain pupils did not stop with school graduation but accompanied pupils for the rest of their lives.

I focus here on philosophical interpretations of school failure and on their investigations of the question of responsibility for social exclusion in education. If phenomena like repeating a year, dropping out, or completing compulsory education without or with little knowledge of symbolic culture are hardly acceptable from a moral point of view, an important question arises: Who, if anybody, is to blame for these phenomena? The interpretations by Kwieciński and his team of the data they collected show some substantial differences between the earlier and the later analyses. Firstly, the responsibility for school failure was explicitly attributed to different agents involved in education, particularly public authorities in charge of schools. Then, a structuralist conception of society was employed in the analyses, in which schools, playing chiefly the role of an instrument of social reproduction, could not be blamed as such for the social exclusion of pupils. The final interpretation drew prominently on a concept of personal ethics, which aimed to develop the sense of personal responsibility among teachers, and thus to impel them to give more care to pupils at risk of social exclusion.

The shifts in Kwieciński's analytical stance over the duration of his research show much more than a mere change in educational paradigms within the work of an influential academic. These shifts also indicate the constant search on

Kwieciński's part for the best possible way to account for school failure in the context of a post-totalitarian state. In this search, different interpretations of a single phenomenon overlap with each other. These shifts are evidence of the inescapability of philosophical and ethical reflections within empirical research. They are shifts which in themselves need to be philosophically assessed.

I will develop my paper in five steps. First, I will depict the paradigm shift that occurred in Polish educational studies in the 1970s. Next, I will sketch the course of the longitudinal research on school failure completed by Zbigniew Kwieciński and his team in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Then I will show, in three consecutive stages, three interpretations of the researched phenomena as they were presented in the work of Kwieciński and colleagues.

Paradigm Shifts in Educational Research

In the early 1970s a new paradigm in educational studies appeared in Poland. It was called scientific socialist pedagogy and was a mixture of Marxist ethics and sciences such as psychology and sociology, the latter being made consistent with orthodox Marxist thought. This scientific socialist paradigm replaced the traditional academic approach to education which, since the beginning of the twentieth century, had been deeply humanistic and philosophical. The new paradigm was predominantly ideological *and* empirical, and at its very centre a Marxist-based theory of education was placed. 'Its task was to search for an effective system of "education" (rather indoctrination) in view of the fulfilment of the goals of "education" drawn from the progressive social ideology (communist doctrine)' (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, 2008, p. 428). Because of its allegedly scientific character and the significant social goals it had to fulfil, socialist pedagogy was often referred to as pedagogism.

The reasons why the new paradigm began to dominate educational studies were numerous. The first one was certainly the growing ideological pressure of Marxism-Leninism. Marxists always regarded traditionally conceived philosophy of education as a product of bourgeois ideology and the manifestation of false consciousness. At the turn of the sixties and seventies they felt strong enough to proclaim this criticism openly. They argued that instead of being immersed in futile speculations, educational researchers should, first of all, study social facts and relations between them. They should do this in order to elaborate

a thorough scientific theory aimed at educating new people suited for living in the socialist society. Such a theory should then be forged into practice at every level of education. In their eyes, philosophy of education as unscientific and unpractical deserved no serious attention. It is worth mentioning that the ideological offensive was accompanied by the passing away of ageing professors of education: these philosophically-oriented professors, educated before the Second World War, were reaching the end of their active lives at this very time. Their successors, taking over their chairs in educational departments and institutes, had hardly any knowledge of philosophy but were much more susceptible to the ideological expectations of the communist government. Kwieciński, describing the generation of the old professors, called it 'the generation of the righteous', while he characterised the generation of their successors as 'the organisationally-oriented generation'. Saying so, he suggested that the latter took their academic positions not so much on the basis of their intellectual and ethical virtues but rather on the basis of their faithfulness in cooperating with the communist government. The newcomers were oriented towards 'career, promotion, status, and power'. As Kwieciński puts it, they were interested more in 'being managers and being promoted than in research' (Kwieciński, 1982, p. 227). Their desire for the definitive overcoming of the tradition of 'the righteous' certainly contributed to the instauration of the new paradigm.

On the margins of scientific socialist pedagogy, the philosophical tradition still vegetated, complying, however, more and more with dialectical and historical materialism. The opponents of the new empirically-oriented educational studies, not being able to develop any non-Marxist philosophy, tried to adjust their humanistic ideals to the prevailing ideology. Good examples of such works were texts by Bogdan Suchodolski and Jan Legowicz. Legowicz, in the book *O nauczycielu. Filozofia nauczania i wychowania (On the Teacher. Teaching and Education Philosophy)*, stated that the most human philosophy was 'the philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism, the philosophy open to the world and human affairs of people, the philosophy animating socially, culturally, and ideologically the contemporary shape of socialism, the philosophy for which knowledge and science are the empowerment of action, whereas humanity, as its perspective, is the goal and highest value' (Legowicz, 1975, p. 5).

A complete turning away from any critical philosophy of education and a focusing on ideologically conceived empirical research were the two main

characteristics of the new paradigm. The new researchers, like Kwieciński, who started their empirical work then were, on the one hand, deprived of any philosophical background except Marxist, and, on the other hand, exposed to ideological pressures from the communist government. Government expectations were that educational research projects would both confirm the educational policy of the authorities and bring solutions to numerous problems that the same policy had caused. It was an unhealthy situation, rewarding scientific conformism. The new paradigm encouraged researchers to undertake their work thorough empirical research, while the authorities still suggested what the outcome of that research should be. In that context Kwieciński started his work. The work was aimed at investigating school failure, first in poor rural, and then in both rural and urban environments. Kwieciński was a hard empiricist with a strong predilection for collecting and interpreting quantitative data. However, as soon as he started his research, he faced a number of issues that were philosophical and ethical in their essence. What he saw, in effect, was the problem of social inequalities in a society which, as the authorities claimed, should have been equal. He also saw the constant discontent of the authorities with the results of his research and the conclusions he drew from them.

Persistence of School Failure

The first empirical project in which Kwieciński took part was to investigate the state of rural education. In his first book he stated: 'Immediately after my university studies I faced the rural poverty and backwardness, the rural school and youth...' (Kwieciński, 2002, p. 7). An interest in rural problems was understandable from the point of view of the prevailing ideology at that time. Rural areas were always regarded by the communist government as the areas of cultural underdevelopment and religious obscurantism, badly needing social reforms and thorough education. Communists expected that without a consistent educational policy aimed at the levelling of chances of rural children and youth, the cultural distance between urban and rural areas would dramatically grow. But the problem was that the very rural areas which needed extra education investments were the bulwarks of private property so inconsistent with the Marxist ideology. The early research findings showed that rural areas were far behind urban ones, not only in education but also in civilisation development. In a 1970 article Kwieciński

noted: 'In order to guarantee to the rural children and youth the highest possible equalisation of chances for access to education, the schools functioning in the rural areas based predominantly on agriculture should be deemed as institutions of special care: state, social, and educational' (Kwieciński, 1982, p. 15).

In those years Kwieciński strongly believed that educational problems which rural schools faced could be effectively overcome. First of all, he perceived the tremendous progress that had already been made in rural schooling thanks to the determination of the communist state. The development of education in the fifties and sixties surely opened the way for social promotion for many rural inhabitants. Also, the rate of children going to school increased dramatically when compared with the period before the start of the communist government. There were many other tremendous achievements showing that rural education could change for the better. On the other hand, in spite of the official government declarations, the gap between urban and rural schools was constantly increasing. Children who graduated from rural schools were more poorly educated and had lower chances to gain access to better schools. The work conditions for rural teachers were much poorer than for their colleagues in urban areas. The former suffered from low incomes and inadequate housing conditions. Rural schools could not afford such facilities as a gymnasium, sports field, teaching aids, and had few resources for excursions and other activities. What was very disturbing was the very high rate of rural children kept back for a year or more at school when compared with urban children. The rate was even higher in the more senior grades. All this evidence showed that the educational chances of rural children were substantially lower than the chances of their urban peers; or as Kwieciński put it, 'the actual state of rural education was getting worse' (*ibid.*, p. 278).

The honest diagnosis of rural education brought Kwieciński to ask a wider question about school failure in Polish education in general, both in the urban and rural areas. At the beginning of the seventies he created a team of researchers and started longitudinal empirical research, focusing on the factors which affected school-choice decisions by teenagers completing their obligatory education. At the centre of investigation was the process of selection, which mirrored class differences between pupils. This effectively meant the division of pupils into those who had a chance to achieve success and those who were deprived of the chance. Division was emerging throughout elementary school and reached its greatest momentum at the choice of a post-elementary school. The transition

from one school type to another was called by Kwieciński the first selection threshold. Now, the research showed that between 20 and 25 percent of elementary school graduates in the country as a whole completed their education with very poor skills in reading. They had difficulties in understanding simple texts; they were unable to make sense of abstract concepts and to draw logical conclusions and inferences from what they read. That kind of learning failure inevitably led to the curtailment of access to symbolic culture, and was an example of social exclusion. As I pointed out at the beginning of this text, the empirical results obtained by Kwieciński did not change over the time interval between the early seventies and late nineties. At the both ends of this period the causes of exclusion were linked to schools and to how schools acted, rather than to the mere lack of access to education. Exclusion, as Kwieciński understood it, arose in the context of social school functioning and should be interpreted as an educational socio-pathology.¹ As a result of school failure one-fourth of pupils chose, as the continuation of their education, vocational schools, where the process of social exclusion was prolonged.

As I mentioned in my book *Wykluczanie jako problem filozofii edukacji (Exclusion as a Problem of the Philosophy of Education)* (Kostyło, 2008, pp. 39-40), Kwieciński, when discussing the dynamic of the post-elementary school structure in the years 1972, 1986, and 1998 respectively, paid attention to an important point. In 1972 'as many as two-thirds of pupils (exactly 63.5 percent – P.K.) ended up in basic vocational schools preparing for worker professions and for professions in the area of simple services' (Kwieciński, 2002, p. 9). Grammar schools were attended by only 15 percent of secondary school students, while vocational and technical high schools were attended by 21.5 percent.² Another study, in 1986, showed that the proportion of students attending grammar schools had risen to

¹ It should be made clear that by no means does Kwieciński argue that students would profit from not attending schools at all. The fate of dropouts shows that leaving school gives rise to much deeper social exclusion. Negative consequences of not going to school cannot, however, prevent the scientist from investigating negative consequences of school functioning.

² The Polish system of vocational training consists of two types of schools. The basic vocational schools (szkoły zawodowe) last three years and instruct their students mainly in professional skills. They offer very little of general education and conclude with vocational training examinations that do not open a way for students to enter university. The technical high schools (technika) last four years. They offer much more of general education and conclude with both vocational training examinations and A-level examinations, allowing students to enter university.

18 percent, those attending vocational and technical high schools to 30.5 percent, while the percentage of those attending basic vocational schools had dropped to more than 51 percent. This trend, giving prevalence to basic vocational schools was clearly reversed in 1998. As Kwieciński noted, twenty five years earlier only one-third of students attended grammar and technical high schools, whereas two-thirds attended basic vocational schools. In 1998 the numbers showed the opposite – a huge majority of students opted for A-level schools, whereas only one-third chose basic vocational schools.

This reversal of proportions, although in itself undoubtedly positive, does not say much about the actual processes that took place over the last twenty years in Polish society; what is more, it may even obscure these processes. It turns out, however, that while in the seventies and eighties, the completion of secondary vocational education was a ticket to professions of relatively high social prestige, ensuring a stable living for the worker and his family, being in these same professions in the late nineties, placed these workers on the edge of the social margins. Not only did the percentage of students choosing vocational schools decrease; there was also a decline in social regard for occupations for which these schools prepared pupils. Kwieciński notes that there were proportionately fewer students in vocational schools in the late nineties, but the risk of their social exclusion was also proportionately higher. In contrast to the situation twenty years earlier, vocational schools in the late nineties were attended mostly by excluded students.

The key conclusion that Kwieciński has drawn from the research discussed above is that 'positive selection for secondary schools [in the seventies and eighties – my note, PK] has been replaced by negative selection for vocational schools [in the second half of the nineties – my note, PK]. Climbing up to the elite through schools has been replaced by pushing the most vulnerable to the margins' (Kwieciński, 2002, p. 32).

The Enlightenment's Optimism

Trying to explain the reasons for a high rate of school failure, Kwieciński addressed in his early researches the concept of the personal responsibility of those involved in the education process. Here, he was faced with two possible explanations, both in fact rather optimistic. The first one came from Soviet

education researchers, the second from a Polish tradition of educational studies called social pedagogy.

Some Soviet theoreticians of education put forward the conviction that responsibility for school failure lay exclusively on the teachers' side. In 1950 Ivan Kairov, then the Minister of Education in the Soviet Union, organised a scientific conference at which he discussed, among other matters, the issue of school failure in a communist state. He acknowledged that the problem existed, but pointed out that it was relatively easy to solve. What was needed was to strengthen the commitment of teachers. Indeed, Kairov went on, more than 10,000 Soviet teachers had already taken part in the movement which was to show that deep commitment, determination, and sincere work would eradicate any trace of school failure. According to Kairov, the teachers present at the conference proved that the theory of the inevitability of school failure in Soviet schools was wrong.

Along the same lines a Soviet theorist, Boris Jesipow, in his 1967 book *Podstawy dydaktyki (The Foundations of Didactics)*, translated and published in Poland in 1971, similarly claimed that any disadvantageous processes in education could be stopped, thanks to higher commitment of teachers. Difficulties in learning experienced by pupils would not become permanent, Jesipow wrote, as long as teachers and educators changed their attitudes towards children at risk, became more active, creative, and far-sighted. Jesipow rejected any suggestion that school failure might be in some cases inevitable, calling it 'a bourgeois theory', and argued that 'the practice of Soviet schools refuted it entirely' (Jesipow, 1971, p. 526). In Soviet educational studies social exclusion in education was then considered transitory and relatively easy to deal with through didactic measures applied by wise and sensitive teachers, committed to the cause of Marxism.

In the Polish literature at that time the Soviet point of view was plainly present, but not unique. A clear counterbalance for it was a Polish indigenous research tradition. Even before the Second World War several Polish research specialists in educational issues, particularly Helena Radlińska, indicated that the reasons for school failure were very complex and that they should be considered in the context of social factors rather than being regarded as teachers' personal responsibility (Radlińska, 1935). Many Polish authors elaborated that point of view in the sixties and later on. For example, Jan Konopnicki in the book

Powodzenia i niepowodzenia szkolne (School Successes and Failures) specified four different causes of school failures: intellectual, emotional, social, and causes directly linked to school work (Konopnicki, 1966). Wicenty Okoń, one of the leading Polish theoreticians of teaching methods at that time, wrote:

The failures in didactic work are connected with the fact of disharmony or conflict between the teacher, pupil, and social conditions of this work. That disharmony or conflict can obviously lead to less serious outcomes, rectifiable immediately, that is without the inhibition of the school career, but they can also condition the prolongation of the pupil's stay at school or even his definitive removal from it. (Okoń, 1970, p. 369)

Thus, at least three factors were put in relief as relevant for understanding the phenomenon of school failure: teacher commitment, pupil disposition, and environment conditions. None of them was superior to another.

Interpreting the data gathered during his numerous research projects Kwieciński expressly referred to this tradition of a plurality of interpretations of school failure. Doing so, he rejected the simplistic view, expressed by the Soviet educational experts. He noticed that although it was usually teachers who were blamed for failures and inefficiency of school work, that kind of interpretation could not stand up to the facts. Instead, the most important factor was the relation between the work of school itself and the social conditions of its functioning. Although Kwieciński was far from laying the whole responsibility for school failure on teachers' shoulders, he was convinced in his early researches that the responsibility for achieving progress lay more with teachers than with structural features of the educational system. It followed that, according to him, thanks to rational and sensitive reforms, personal engagement on various levels of the educational system, and the commitment of local authorities and parents, substantial improvements could be achieved. Certainly, teachers were not the only group responsible for school failure; there were many other groups which could be blamed. What was important, however, was that each group could be made more sensitive towards the fate of excluded pupils and consequently could behave in a more rational and supportive way. By the early eighties Kwieciński would argue that the very problem of school failure was a wider social one, calling for rational understanding and the good will of those involved. 'If I then tried to unveil the relationships and dependencies between the operations of the rural school itself and the social conditions of its functioning, it was in view of

showing the need and necessity for a wide social support for a school operating in more difficult conditions than average' (Kwieciński, 1982, p. 29).

Education as Social Reproduction

The research carried out by Kwieciński and his team in the eighties and nineties showed that educational problems were much more complicated than Kwieciński first thought. In spite of rational reform projects and the sincere commitment of many education leaders, the unsatisfactory situation in education did not change. Neither the first Solidarity movement (1980-1981) nor the division of power between the communist government and Solidarity in 1989 stopped the negative tendencies in education, nor did they diminish the rate of pupils excluded because of school failure. Therefore, another explanation was needed: a theory that would cover numerous social factors contributing to school failure, that would account for them, and bring some kind of explanation for the alleged inevitability of social exclusion perpetuated by schools.

In those years Kwieciński became acquainted with a number of Western sociological and psychological theories which threw light on the problem he investigated.

In the meantime, education, and within it principally the school, as a system of institutionalised influences on children and youth, is exposed in the West as 'the hidden programme' of the reproduction of the relationships of domination, hierarchy, and the legitimisation of inequalities, hate, and war. (Kwieciński, 1992, p. 119)

After censorship was abolished those Western theories were at last allowed to be referred to by Polish researchers. Following the texts he was then publishing one is struck by the number of names, concepts, and theories he quoted and discussed, stemming mainly from Western Europe and the United States. It seems that a theory which appeared to him to be particularly fruitful for explaining comprehensively the problem of school failure was Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, and within it the concept of symbolic violence. It is worth noticing that in a text of 1982 Kwieciński argued that badly functioning rural schools are 'the instrument of the reproduction of social differences' (Kwieciński, 1982, p. 278).

In the 1990 article *Ukryta przemoc jako podstawa racjonalności funkcjonowania szkoły* (*Hidden Violence as a Basis for Rationality of School Activity*) Kwieciński

explored the questions of symbolic violence, using Bourdieu's perspectives and analyses. He acknowledged that symbolic violence accounted well for the persistence of social stratification and he traced the role of education in assuring it. Although in the title of his text he called school activities based on symbolic violence rational, the key argument put forward in the text was that that violence contributing to social exclusion was far from being rational. The vision of a school which reproduces innumerable pupils doomed to educational failure and social exclusion was horrifying to Kwieciński.

If the indirect means of hidden structural and symbolic violence – and particularly the system of educational institutions – reproduced (or produced) hosts of people unable to participate in culture, nothing would then justify the using of violence. What is more, that kind of violence would become utterly unacceptable from the point of view of the need of progress and self-realisation of an individual. (Kwieciński, 1992, pp. 123-124)

Educational structures reproduced educational poverty, obstructing the developmental possibilities of pupils. It excluded large numbers from cultural enrichment. It resulted in the symbolic feebleness of many individuals who became thus unable to understand adequately the meanings of their own culture. Instead of being a vehicle of social inclusion, schools became, at least from the point of view of the disadvantaged, an instrument of social exclusion.

Bourdieu's structuralist conception of symbolic violence suited well Kwieciński's needs. It brought an overall explanation of several educational phenomena with which he had dealt so far. Social problems of education became less impenetrable when they were interpreted in light of Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence, field, social capital, and habitus. But the problem was that in relinquishing over-optimistic views of teachers' unique responsibility for the achievements of schools, and attributing failure instead to social factors, one might easily come back to a disquieting structuralist insight. Such a structuralist account would on the one hand challenge simplistic Marxist orthodoxy; but on the other hand it would undermine the very concept of human freedom and its ability to recreate social life according to rational assumptions which saw themselves as free of ideological influences.

At that very moment (1992) Kwieciński was about to adopt Bourdieu's radical philosophical interpretation of school failure as conclusive. He faced the temptation of revisiting a Bourdieu's neo-Marxist concept and using it to explain what was happening to Polish education. In my opinion Kwieciński did not succumb

to that temptation. He never admitted that the responsibility for exclusion in education lay exclusively on the side of the structures of power and dominance. On Kwieciński's later account, those structures are relevant to education, but not decisive. They may shape the form of education and give a direction to it, but they cannot relieve particular teachers, parents, or other agents of responsibility for particular students. The justification of a moral responsibility like that requires addressing a philosophy different from Marxist or neo-Marxist ideas.

Towards a Personal Ethics

The longitudinal research done by Kwieciński showed two things. Firstly, the phenomenon of school failure could be explained only in terms of social factors, among which an important but not unique role was played by the teachers' attitude. Secondly, a structuralist explanation of the phenomenon was scientifically attractive but it left little place for the concept of educational change and thus justified, as it were, the state of social exclusion of pupils. Here, a clearly new point in Kwieciński's thought appeared. In his texts of the late 1990s and early 2000s numerous suggestions were made as to the relevance of personal ethics of teachers in their dealings with pupils. A remarkable statement along those lines was included in the preface to the manual *Pedagogika (Pedagogics)* in 2005. Kwieciński pointed out that a good teacher was somebody who supported the development of the Other, who guided the pupil into self-reliance and interpreted to him the complex meanings of events and experiences, narratives and symbols. This was a clear rejection of Communist educational ideology in which teachers were the representatives of objective social laws and had to abide by them, not paying attention to the needs of an individual. On the other hand, it was a kind of admission of excessive liberalism in education, resulting in viewing the school as a place of constant competition between pupils getting them ready for the rat race in the future. In steering a defensible course therefore, the teacher was expected to have, as her personal spiritual endowment, benevolence and generosity towards other people, sensitivity to their problems, empathy with their emotions, consciousness of their capacities, their rate of learning and development. 'If that kind of basic benevolence is absent in somebody's life, let her abandon the idea of becoming a teacher, pedagogue, educator or counsellor' (Kwieciński, 2005, p. 12).

Developing this current of thought, Kwieciński argued that without that elementary readiness, academic knowledge and the opportunity of acquiring wisdom would become useless. If unconditional and unselfish friendliness were outweighed by envy and greed, if the good sides of the world were kept only to oneself, then it would be better to resign from the goal of obtaining a professional diploma in education. Candidates for the teaching profession should not waste their time studying educational issues if they thought that it was not worthwhile to help children and youth in their development and learning. The task of good education, Kwieciński concluded, would certainly not be undertaken by the mass culture and market economy.

The concept of particular moral responsibility of teachers for pupils at risk of failure has recently become a distinctive trait of Kwieciński's thought. The context of those reflections is an ethics of the personal rather than a vocational or legal ethics. Teachers' professional codes of conduct, as well as legal regulations dealing with teachers' rights and duties, are not enough to enhance teachers' commitment to the achievements of pupils at risk. Professional and legal rules, even if fulfilled faultlessly, cannot be expected to govern all situations. The insufficiency of law to provide a solution for all cases is particularly evident in education. This is why such authors as Richard S. Peters or David Carr highlight an ethical dimension of education. In that point Kwieciński would follow their line. Only a teacher who is deeply aware of her responsibility for the future fate of pupils would be ready to give them more attention and assistance while they face failure in school. That moral challenge faces the teacher independently of the degree in which she executes her legal duties. Even the most conscientious performance of the duties resulting from state laws and school regulations does not release the teacher from questioning herself: 'What else can I do for the pupil threatened by exclusion?' The expression 'what else can I do?' indicates the need for a kind of ethical concern which the teacher ought to provide for the benefit of the pupil. Thus, the teacher is urged to give from herself more than is required by law, to raise herself above the ancient justice principle telling us to give everyone what he or she deserves. Although Kwieciński does not draw this moral conclusion from his research explicitly, it clearly results from what he argues in the last of his texts.

The relationships between teachers and pupils cannot be fully perceived nor described by legal norms. The law, which functions in society as a tool for

distributing fairly and justly rights and duties, is an imperfect instrument for the analysis of what happens in the actual conduct of human affairs. Not all human relationships can be reduced to the notion of guaranteed rights and required duties. This is because in many cases (perhaps even in most of them) people do for themselves much more than is required by law. They do that although they have no obligation to do so. Leszek Kołakowski, criticising the notion of the so-called code morality, points out that relationships based on asymmetrical moral duties toward other people are the most valued. 'In reality, the most valuable moral values appear as a result of an asymmetry between code morality and a claim that is made in situations in which somebody decides to acknowledge as her or his obligation something which no third party has the right to ascribe to her or him' (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 158). People acknowledge, in dealing with others in a professional role, an ethical concern which stems from morality, not from law. Thanks to that concern such attitudes as generosity, forgiveness, mercy or magnanimity are possible and recognisable. Each of those attitudes implies that people do for others something more than they ought to on the basis of law, and they do that voluntarily, pushed by motives which escape legal analyses. Without that concern relationships between people would be based exclusively on the rule of justice, that is, on calculating the proportion between what we give and what we receive. It is obvious that the teacher in her work does not limit herself only to fulfilling the rule of justice and does not base her action exclusively on the principle *do ut das*. Rightly, we expect from the teacher something more than the legalistic fulfilment of duties.

Conclusion

The results of Kwieciński's research were not surprising. School failure is not only a phenomenon of poorer countries. They are put in relief in a number of publications in philosophy of education where a low level of compulsory education and various cultural weaknesses of students are indicated and discussed. Marek Dietrich, a late member of the Polish Academy of Science, wrote that today one can come across the statement that approximately 40% of society members of developed countries are functional illiterates; that is, persons who are not able to act in the real world (Dietrich, 1997, p. 87-88). School system failures are therefore somehow independent of how many resources public authorities spend

on education and which organisational system they actually adopt. No matter whether we talk about the school system in the West or East we are not fully satisfied with its educational results.

What was unique in Kwieciński's work was the time span in which the research took place. The last years of communism, the transition period, and the first years of liberal democracy represent three consecutive stages of recent Polish history. In spite of the significant differences between them, the very phenomenon of school failure has remained largely unchanged. On this account it would seem that school failure may be independent not only of economic factors, but also of political ones.

In Kwieciński's constant view the opportunities of a large proportion of the young could not be fulfilled, not only because of unquestionable faults on the part of teachers but also, and even more, because of wider and more complex social factors. Such questions as parents' education level, local community activities aimed at facilitating education, distance from school, and particularly, pupils' social class origin, were put under the spotlight by Kwieciński and his team, and were identified as significantly contributing to the educational fate of the young. At the beginning the research findings were utterly unfavourable to the communist ideology; they indicated, contrary to the official declarations, that Polish society was deeply stratified, and that the school system was ineffective in equalling educational opportunities. The later findings became a kind of accusation of the liberal regimes of the post-Communist era in Poland, which were also unable to eradicate the social exclusion of pupils.

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