Philosophy of education in post-Soviet societies of Eastern Europe: Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia

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This article explores the role of philosophy of education in three post-Soviet societies of Eastern Europe: Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia. The characteristic themes and approaches of philosophical reflection about education in these societies are explored with reference to three periods: the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Introduction

The post-Soviet societies of Eastern Europe are by no means a monolithic or homogeneous grouping. These societies share a number of features in common, but there are also important differences between them. This is true of the three countries that are the subject of the present article: Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia. Poland and Lithuania share the experience of Soviet occupation in the last century and domination from the Second World War until (roughly) the end of the 1980s, whilst Slovenia has a rather different experience under communism as part of the former Yugoslavia, which severed its political alliance with the Soviet Union in 1948. All three countries have in common the experience of recovering political independence—with its opportunities and challenges—within the last 15 years or so, and formal admission to the European Union in 2004. The countries are, however, different from each other linguistically, demographically, culturally and geopolitically.

This article seeks to explore the ways in which philosophical perspectives have been brought to bear on educational questions in these three countries, with some attention to commonalities and differences across the three contexts. There is no attempt to explore the relationship between philosophical ideas and the detailed

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realities of educational practice. Such an exploration would require extended consideration of the educational systems of these countries in historical perspective (as offered, for example, in the case of Lithuania by Jakavičius, 2004). There is also no attempt to impose a particular definition of ‘philosophical’ on the discussion. Much fundamental reflection about education in our three countries has been ‘philosophical’ in a loose sense, where elements of different kinds of reasoning have been blended together without the focus and rigour characteristic of (say) Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy. Nevertheless, the traditions of fundamental reflection about education in our societies are worth exploring, not least because they offer perspectives that, appropriately re-examined, offer insights for our contemporary situation.

The article is divided into three sections, devoted to the pre-Soviet, the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, respectively.

The pre-Soviet era

The period prior to the Soviet era in our three countries was characterized by educational theorizing in which three interrelated themes were prominent: culture (as in the ‘pedagogy of culture’), national identity (as in ‘the transmission and preservation of national culture’) and religion (or spirituality). Very often these themes were woven together in a complex way.

Polish educational studies have long been marked by major works of thinkers whose philosophical activity has been focused on education and pedagogical problems. Bogdan Nawrocyński (1882–1974), one of the most important and influential Polish educationists, wrote extensively on education and cultural and pedagogical aspects of human life, most notably in his book *Principles of teaching*, which was first published in 1930 and which can be regarded as articulating a ‘pedagogy of culture’ (Nawrocyński, 1987a,b). Here there is an insistence that education does not consist of the mere ‘collection’ of various pieces of information, but in personally transformative participation in culture. Central to the personally transformative aspects of this participation in Nawrocyński’s view is the role played by spirituality, as revealed in his book *Spiritual life: a sketch of philosophy of culture* (Nawrocyński, 1947), written during the Second World War. Certain values seen as constituents of the spiritual life (sanctity, goodness, truth and beauty) are regarded as necessary for persons in their search for education and for personal identity (Nawrocyński, 1947, p. 90). Influences upon Nawrocyński include Rickert and Dilthey. A similar ‘pedagogy of culture’ was developed by Sergiusz Hessen (1887–1950), a Russian educationist and philosopher who left Russia in 1925, spent 2 years in Germany, then 10 years in Prague and in 1936 settled in Poland. His main publications include *Foundations of education* (Hessen, 1997a) and *On contradictions and unity of teaching. Issues of personal education* (Hessen, 1997b). Hessen’s work, which also emphasized themes of culture, absolute values and spirit, remains inspirational for many Polish educators. Interestingly, there are elements in Hessen’s work that emphasize the development of ‘personal autonomy’, although understood in a different way from contemporary liberal educators. Before the Second World War, therefore,
educational thinking in Poland was dominated by the ‘pedagogy of culture’. Although a spiritual or religious dimension was inherent in this view, it tended not to be analysed in a detailed way.

In Lithuania the author of the first book in the language, Martynas Mažvydas (1547), wrote not only about the accessibility of education and the importance of learning in the native language, but also about the meaning and importance of auklėjimas (social education), a concept to which reference will be made in more detail later. Bishop Motiejus Valančius (1801–1875) wrote about the secret home schools which operated in Lithuania during its occupation by Tzarist Russia and which preserved the national language. Stasys Šalkauskis (early twentieth century), who has been described as the orginator of modern neo-Thomism (Jovačia, 2001), developed a system of holistic education which stressed the importance of developing the three theological virtues (faith, love and hope) and a disposition of the person towards God (Šalkauskis, 1991). Another strand in Šalkauskis’ thinking in Lithuania emphasized a form of education in national, patriotic and civic values. Stasys Šalkauskis’s student Antanas Maceina developed these ideas. In his work National education, Maceina (1991) analysed the relationship between religion and nationality, arguing that the experience of God can be distinctively mediated through national identity. The national–Catholic approach dominated education in Lithuania from the early 1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War. At other times a less national and Catholic view of education prevailed, the leading influences upon which included Pestalozzi, Herbart, Dysterveeg and Kant (particularly his On pedagogy). Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis (1881–1955) focused on the individual’s interaction with the environment and researched the psychological foundations of the educational process. The relationship between these differing conceptions of education has been studied by Bukauskiene (1995). In the pre-Soviet period a system of separate schools for national minorities was legalized, which was progressive for the time in comparison with many other European countries. These minorities tended, however, to be rather culturally isolated (Saugėnienė, 2003).

Before the First World War the territory comprising modern Slovenia was part of the Austrian Empire. Here a form of Catholic educational theory was dominant, and this remained influential after 1918, when it became preoccupied with moral and political questions. On this theory religion was seen as central to education and to morality. It was required that all school subjects be permeated with Catholicism. Marxism was condemned as a materialistic and atheistic doctrine. Before the Second World War the impact of Soviet educational thought on Slovenia was very limited. Nevertheless, some Soviet thinkers, such as Blonsky, influenced Marxist and left-oriented Slovene teachers in their call for a new kind of ‘Labour’ school.

More or less negative attitudes towards Marxism were held by K. Ozvald (1927) and S. Gogala (1970), who were the most important Slovene educational thinkers at this time. Both were representatives of the so-called cultural educational theory, which was mostly grounded in Scheler’s phenomenological ideas and Spranger’s cultural theory. Ozvald analysed the relationship between culture and education and emphasized that education should be understood from a cultural point of view. On
this view, cultural heritage, love and spiritual values are seen as central foundations of education. Gogala shared this general perspective but emphasized the importance of personal and authentic appropriation of culture. Gogala therefore rejected any coercive method of education and every form of indoctrination: the anthropological and individualistic character of this view marks it out strongly from Marxist or Soviet theories in their different forms.

The Soviet era

After the occupation of Poland and Lithuania by the Soviet Union, Soviet educational thinking asserted its influence, sometimes harshly. Existing forms of educational theory, and western educational theory more generally, were rejected as reactionary, bourgeois and idealist. Herbart, for example, was criticized for introducing idealism into the theory of instruction by grounding the instruction on a metaphysical psychology developed on the basis of Kantian epistemology. Dewey was labelled as a mouthpiece for the interests of American monopoly capitalists (on the reception of Dewey’s ideas in Russia before the 1930s see Mchitarjan, 2000). Socialist educational theory based on dialectical materialism, with its demand for the socialist ideological orientation of the proletariat, was seen as the only theory that was socially progressive and scientific. This involved more than the imposition of ideas. In Lithuania, as elsewhere, the schooling system was destroyed, with many teachers being physically removed and some executed.

One of the most significant Soviet educational thinkers at this time was Anton Makarenko (1888–1939), whose educational thought and practice was particularly influenced by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gorky (Filonov, 1994). Although Makarenko’s thought is extensive, varied and wide-ranging (including literary works such as Road to life (1951), Flags on the towers (1973), Learning to live (1953), Pedagogical poem (1975) and A book for parents (1952), a number of systematic themes in his thinking can be readily identified. One of the most prominent of these features is the emphasis on organizing the entire life of the young person within an ‘integral educational process’ including not only the school but also the family, clubs, public organizations, production collectives and the community as a whole in the service of the vospitanije (or upbringing) of the active and committed communist person. Another prominent feature of Makarenko’s thought is the importance of ‘the collective’ in this process (including the collective of the school and the cultivation of traditions of collective life). For Makarenko, vospitanije takes place in the collective and through the collective. By collective Makarenko meant an association of people for common purposes and activities, having a certain structure of powers and responsibilities and defined interdependent relationships between its members in the overall context of a communist society. Makarenko’s ideas were worked out in concrete form in the Gorky Colony (1920–1928) and the Dzerzinskij Commune (1927–1935). Although Makarenko insisted that his specific methods could not be uncritically transported to any context, his general ideas were very prominent throughout the communist world. In her theoretical writings and practical work Krupskaja
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(1869–1939) (Lenin’s wife) also developed the theory of communist vospitanije, stressing the importance of students embracing atheism, grasping the fundamentals of science and denouncing ‘anti-scientific propositions’ (Konstantinovas et al., 1978). This sort of education aimed to educate ‘Soldiers of the Revolution’ who were prepared for class struggle and the sacrifice of their personal interest in the name of the higher interest of the socialist society. The teacher was seen as an instrument of the will of the Party. [On Marxist theories of education more generally see, for example, Strike (1989) and Miller (1998); on the notion of vospitanije see, for example, Halstead (1994).]

These Soviet educational theories were in sharp contrast to the prevailing educational theorizing and practice in our three countries prior to the Soviet era. In the Soviet era philosophical reflection about education in each of our three countries had to take place in the context of the various forms of censorship and inhibition imposed on teaching, research and publication by the Soviet regime. The nature and extent of this censorship and inhibition differed from one country to another and from one period of time to another. There were some years when it was very difficult to publish if one was unwilling to include some ideologically acceptable material in an article or book. In other years censorship and inhibition were not so tough and educationists could be more open and critical. Much here depended on the detailed political situation in each country from time to time. In all three countries some scholars submitted to pressure and became apologists for Soviet educational thinking. In general, however, many important educationists (along with other citizens in our countries) played a subtle ‘game’ with the authorities in which real intentions, beliefs and values were cloaked and obscured for political reasons but were nevertheless plain enough to many students and readers. The ideology of Marxism was something that educationists and educators had to deal with as part of what is known in Lithuania as ‘double-life syndrome’: a mode of life in which the expression of one’s real commitments in the public domain was severely circumscribed (by discretion as well as by more serious constraints and forces). Expressions of Soviet educational ideology were paid lip-service to, but were often taken with a pinch of salt, to put it mildly.

In the case of Poland, for example, the collective educational theory of Makarenko was put into practice and expounded (see, for example, the chapter on Makarenko in Suchodolski, 1965, pp. 253–263), but the theory was widely perceived as (merely) ideological. Both Nawroczyński and Hessen, the prominent pre-war educational thinkers, to whom reference has already been made, stood firm behind their own ideas and were not affected by Soviet ideology. However, other educational thinkers trimmed their sails to the prevailing winds of Soviet thought, as they did in Lithuania and Slovenia. The dangers and costs of this, however, can be clearly illustrated in the case of the Polish educational thinker Bogdan Suchodolski (1903–1992). Suchodolski published widely on the philosophy of man and the history of humanity, as well as on the concept of culture understood as the expression of human creativity in science, arts and other forms of contemporary social life (Suchodolski, 1967). His main educational idea was that education should be open
to future possibilities of human living in the world: central to his thinking is a conception of ‘education for the future’. Many of Suchodolski’s arguments are strictly philosophical in that they are unimpaired by ideology (Suchodolski, 1999). However, some of Suchodolski’s works include ideological presuppositions and elements (see, for example, Suchodolski, 1967, pp. 84–104). This has placed his entire work under a cloud as far as post-communist readers and scholars are concerned. Recent scholarly work has been concerned to explore the enduring importance of Suchodolski’s thought by drawing attention to aspects of ambiguity in it (Witkowski, 2001). Suchodolski is therefore a good example of a thinker whose reputation has been tarnished by his apparent appropriation of Soviet ideas: careful scholarship will be needed to rehabilitate his contribution to educational thought for contemporary readers and scholars.

In Lithuania some thinkers managed to keep afloat certain features of the Lithuanian educational tradition and to avoid complicity with Soviet educational thought. The importance of auklėjimas or social education, a key notion in the Lithuanian tradition of pedagogy, was emphasized in a way that sought to distinguish it from the rather different notion of vospitanije. Jovaiša and Vaitkevičius suggested a non-ideological definition of auklėjimas in their book Foundations of pedagogy (Jovaiša & Vaitkevičius, 1987). Vaitkevičius was one of the first scholars in the Soviet Union who started writing about social education and social pedagogy. The first dissertation on social pedagogy was defended in Lithuania towards the end of the Soviet period (Leliūgiene, 1989). By the time of perestroika, Russian progressive thought in education had started to diverge from the paradigm of communist vospitanije. At least the term ‘communist’ was avoided and a broader definition adopted (Babanskij, 1988). Jonas Laužikas followed the most progressive ideas of Šalkauskas, Pestalozzi, Komensky and Piaget. Along with his student Leonas Jovaiša, who has had a profound influence on the philosophy of education in Lithuania, Laužikas managed to escape Soviet ideology by exploiting certain ambiguities in Soviet educational theory and practice. Laužikas emphasized ‘collaborative pedagogy’ between teachers and students and the importance of seeing the pupil as an individual who is an agent of his/her own learning and development (Laužikas, 1981; Vaitkevičius, 1993). Jonas Laužikas’ work was continued by Leonas Jovaiša, who focused on vocational education and adopted integrated philosophical, educational and psychological approaches in the articulation of the holistic development of the individual. Theories of differentiated teaching (Šiaučiukėnienė, 1997) and modular teaching (Jucevičienė, 1989) received considerable attention, not only in Lithuania but also in various parts of the Soviet Union. Lithuanian educational scholars who were trying to avoid ideology tended to focus upon psychological questions relating to teaching, although even here authoritarian influence could rear its head. Vygotsky’s theories, for example, displeased Stalin’s regime and were suppressed. Vygotsky was rehabilitated only decades after Stalin’s death, and then only partially. As Jovaiša (2001, p. 157) has noted, only those parts of Vygotsky’s work that were consistent with an emphasis upon the central role of the teacher were accepted.
As elsewhere in our three countries, Soviet educational thinking and practice had very little real impact on the hearts and minds of the people in Lithuania. National consciousness and identity were not erased (on these notions see, for example, McLaughlin & Jucevičienė, 1997) and Catholic religious upbringing and faith were preserved in many families.

The tension between the acceptance (and advocacy) by scholars of parts of Soviet educational thinking and their expression of doubts and reservations about that thinking can be seen in Slovenia in the case of V. Schmidt, the leading Slovenian author of socialist educational theory after the war. In apparent contradiction to Soviet thinking, Schmidt argued that there is no universally valid educational theory and educational system that is appropriate for any time for every nation (Schmidt, 1982). However, this apparent critical distance did not prevent him (Schmidt, 1950, p. 327) and other Slovene socialist educational thinkers and policy-makers from repeating the Soviet educational doctrine, especially regarding the question of the aims of education and moral education. The political alliance between the Soviet Union and Federal Yugoslavia (of which Slovenia was part) lasted only from 1945 to 1948, when the Yugoslav Communist Party was expelled from the Soviet-dominated international communist organization. The political break with the Soviet Union in 1948 did not, however, mark a clean break with Soviet educational thinking. Gradually, though, a more independent tradition of educational thinking emerged. The first critique of Slovene post-war educational theory, arguing that it neglected the child and overestimated the role of society, was articulated in 1950 by I. Segula (1950). Later, her critique came to be seen as a symbolic end to the hegemony of socialist educational theory. From 1950 the Soviet model of educational theory was progressively replaced by a model of educational theory that paralleled the self-management reform in the economy and other fields. In this ‘self-management’ model of educational theory and practice a more important role was given to children, to an inductive method of educational research and to national educational tradition. Despite this, the impact of Makarenko’s ideas and of dialectical materialism as the philosophical bases of Marxist educational theory did not disappear. Educational theory was the bastion of the most dogmatic interpretation of Marxism among the academic disciplines taught at university. Western Marxism, for example, was ruled out of court.

In 1965 The Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana was established as a national institute of educational research which was relatively independent of the Department of Education at the University. The Institute started to develop through its research a broader view of education and educational theory, drawing (since 1983) upon such intellectual traditions as the Frankfurst School and French structuralist Marxism. This was condemned by prominent university professors of education, primarily on ideological grounds, although in due course their successors adopted a broader curriculum.
The post-Soviet era

In the post-Soviet era in our three countries philosophical reflection about education has shared in the spirit of openness and liberation that has characterized so many aspects of life and work in our societies. The collapse of the Soviet Union also involved a collapse of its educational thinking and practice at home and abroad, although that collapse had happened rather earlier in Slovenia (on the impact of *perestroïka* on moral education in Russia see, for example, Halstead, 1994, pp. 431–438). Whilst some educational thinkers in the west continue to see Marxism as offering a useful perspective from which capitalist schooling can be criticized, Marxist views are currently given short shrift in our three countries. In these societies practical educational reform has oriented the schooling system to predominantly European and western influences and imperatives and this has been reflected in national educational policy documents. Prominent ingredients in these developments include a concern with the educational implications of liberal democratic principles and values (as seen, for example, in initiatives in relation to teaching methods, respect for diversity and education for citizenship), with the wide-ranging educational agenda of the EU and with the need to temper undue state control in education (as seen in a recognition of the rights of parents and minorities). More specific concerns reflective of western influence include initiatives relating to lifelong learning, school development, ICT, performativity and management. Another point of international reference is the educational work of UNESCO (1996). All these developments have been reflected in philosophical thinking about education in these countries.

In Poland scholars now explore the pedagogical relevance of classical philosophies as well as various modern and postmodern philosophical conceptions and perspectives, such as critical theory, political philosophy, hermeneutics and postmodernism (see, for instance, Folkierska, 1990; Rutkowiak, 1992; Szkudlarek, 1993; Reut, 1997; Wołoszyn, 1998; Witkowski, 2001). This creates an intellectual atmosphere in which educational studies can become a vital part of academic life as well as a resource for those concerned with educational practice. Catholic educational thinking, relating to catechetics, religious pedagogy, the role of religion in schools, religious upbringing, religious commitment and the moral and religious condition of Polish society, has also enjoyed a renaissance (see Milerski, 2003).

In Lithuania the Lithuanian movement ‘Sajūdis’, an organization influenced by the Polish ‘Solidarność’, became one of the key catalysts of the fall of the USSR. ‘Sajūdis’ inspired the first ideas of post-Soviet Lithuanian educational reform. In 1988 these ideas were publicly announced by the Lithuanian delegation at the Soviet Union Teacher Congress. Later, in newly independent Lithuania, the intensive reformation of education was gradually implemented on the basis of the Lithuanian Education Concept (Lietuvos švietimo koncepcija, 1992). The concept of the ‘National School’ was reoriented to reflect the new understanding of the Lithuanian common school. Much attention has been paid to conceptualizing the nature of educational science so that its scope
is understood more broadly (Mialaret, 1985; Jucevičienė, 1997), and this is reflected in the replacement, at the suggestion of Leonas Jovaiša, of the term pedagogy by educational science (edukologija in Lithuanian) (Jovaiša, 2001). Jovaiša (1993) has developed a view of education that emphasizes the importance of self-expression. A significant influence in the development of the contemporary philosophy in education in Lithuania is T. H. McLaughlin, who has taught an annual course for doctoral students and published a collection of his articles in Lithuanian (McLaughlin, 1997).

Having conducted a detailed study of contemporary Lithuanian educational policy and practice, Katiliūtė (2001) confirmed that the contemporary Lithuanian school aims to follow global and European trends in education. In this process a particular challenge is the need to develop appropriate responses to multiculturalism, which is still unfamiliar to Lithuanian teachers and which is related to the question of national minorities (Saugėničienė, 2003).

Similar trends can be discerned in relation to the transformation of the schooling system in Slovenia. Fundamental ‘European’ political, cultural and moral concepts and values (such as human rights, tolerance, solidarity, pluralistic democracy and the rule of law) are in the forefront of much educational thinking. The work of the Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana, described above, has continued to be significant.

Philosophy of education in our three countries is likely to benefit from the wide-ranging openness and liberation to which we have referred. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing philosophers of education and educators more generally in our contexts is that of resisting a wholesale assimilation of our educational thinking and practice to western and European principles and norms. To some extent this is no bad thing (no one wants to return to the Soviet era), but when one looks back to the pre-Soviet era in our countries one finds a distinctive form of educational thinking which could be a resource for contemporary educational theorizing. The contemporary notion of liberal education and the contemporary practice of education in the west are not beyond criticism. Culture, national identity and religion (spirituality) remain problematic issues for liberal educators (figuring, for example, in prominent communitarian critiques of liberal education). In excavating and restating our traditional educational thought our countries may not only be defending our threatened distinctiveness, but also be refreshing and enriching western and European philosophizing about education.

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