



Stockholm, 13th December 2021

Review of the PhD thesis

By Beata Zwierzynska, M.A.

SCHOOL DEMOCRATISATION: A CASE STUDY
OF THE ROUND TABLE TALKS ON EDUCATION

under the supervision of Professor Dr. Ewa Kurantowicz's

With great interest I began reading the thesis by Beata Zwierzynska. My curiosity about Poland's modern history concerning the Round Table talks (RTT), which triggered democratic changes together with the free election, was the main reason for my peaked interest. Thanks to the RTT, the peaceful end of communist regime was possible. Questions about the effects of the sub-table talks on educational policy and educational system are the most interesting here, and yet the most difficult to address. My curiosity was even stronger, because I did not have any insight knowledge about those talks, and the time after 1981, as I had left Poland before the Martial Law was imposed. In addition, the thesis is even of a bigger value as it is written in English.

I was impressed with Beata Zwierzynska's attempt to collect all material and find the right persons to be interviewed, get access and establish rapport with them.

The opening rhetorical question in the thesis '*Why are Polish schools still not fully democratised after more than 30 years of the democratic transition?*' however, did not direct my reading whatsoever, as it was impossible to examine it empirically. Yet, the question the author poses, reveals that the author has been steered by a passionate and personal inquiry.

The aim of the dissertation is, according to the author, "to explore school democratisation as perceived and envisioned by the participants of the 1989 round table talks on education" p. 15; and "to contextualise the round table talks on education as a foundation for the reform", which the participants had in mind.

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As far as an **academic discipline** is concerned, it seems this thesis about democratisation of the educational system, is on the crossroad between Education and Political sciences; it focuses both on Educational Policy, but also on the Modern History of Education. One might even try to place it in Sociology of Education. In the Polish context, it could also be possible to locate it in the General Education as it is about the role of teachers and teachers' profession, as well as values of education. As the thesis is written in English, it can naturally be seen as belonging to International Education, but I doubt it. Nevertheless, it has a higher value just because the author wants to address international educationists and bring the Polish issue concerning school development closer to them and most of all to the partners' universities who were responsible for the PhD programme she had attended. I think the thesis fits best in General Education and History of Education.

In the text that follows, I begin with **the structure** of the thesis and a brief summary of each chapter, looking at the formal aspects of the thesis, at which **theory and methodology** the author uses, how the method of collecting and analysing the data was chosen, i.e. on what grounds; how was it employed, or utilised, what are the results and how are they discussed. I will then mention both some strengths and weaknesses that I have discovered. Finally, the concluding remarks concerning the approval to seek the PhD degree will follow.

The dissertation is built around six chapters of various length, an introduction and an epilogue; summaries in English and Polish, a list of tables and figures, and a rather short reference list. Some of the chapters are very long (cf. ch.3) while the two last ones are quite short (ch.5 & 6). However, a discussion of the results is missing as well as a list of main Polish concepts and abbreviations which could be very useful.

The **first** chapter is significant as it gives a ground and a framework to the whole thesis. It is about the background, methodology and research procedures. Here the aims of the research are presented, as well as the research questions, research methods, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. The author considers three research questions:

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1. *What shaped the political-pedagogical context of the RTT on education?*
2. *What were the main points and positions in the discussions during the RTT?*
3. *What were the round table participants' understandings of school democratisation?*

They seem well formulated and answerable as research questions.

The epistemology that the author employs, and some theoretical considerations are missing, while mentioning and discussing them would be appropriate and useful. Nevertheless, the author instead provides some definitions of democracy. This was needed as the thesis is about school democratisation. Here the author writes: "democratisation describes a shift from authoritarianism to democracy or a transformation, a process heading towards one or another kind of democracy. Democratisation is difficult to define precisely because democracy itself notoriously defies definition" p. 9. Although this is partially true, several other suitable definitions could be applied. The author, however, refers only to Schmitter & Karl, 1991 (cf. p.9-12). Both authors are political scientists, which is appropriate, but on what premise they were chosen, has not been explained. There are several political scientists and sociologists dealing with issues of democracy, and what is more, many focus their research and theoretical ideas related to democratic school development within democratic countries. What was then the justification for using Schmitter and Karl's definition over all others? Furthermore, to follow Schmitter & Karl's (1991) way of dealing with *What democracy is... and is not*, does not lead to an operationalizing definition, which would be suitable to adopt when analysing the RTT. Even if the authors refer to minimal conditions to be fulfilled to call the systems democratic, after Robert Dahl, well known American political theorist, their implementation of 'sliders' as components of producing democracy models (Figure 1) seems insufficient. The 'sliders', can indicate the position of each component of being situated from top to bottom level. "They illustrate the realisation of democratic principles". But they could not be a replacement for the working definition of democracy as possible operationalisation of this concept.

When it comes to what is meant by 'democratisation of schools', the author refers mainly to the Polish authors, with one exception of Harber (C. 1997) which is far too little to conceptualise the idea clearly. Furthermore, what democratisation signifies and how it is operationalised remains unclear. Perhaps, democracy and democratisation are based on the author's vision, i.e. her not articulated ontology.

Perhaps the section describing governance in democratised schools could be considered as a kind of operationalised definition developed by the author, even if it only partially relates to governance in democratised schools. However, this statement is an exception in the thesis. The discussion about

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governance in democratised schools is “described by capturing **the level of control** at schools and other contexts over those in **power position**; whether **elections** of any kind take place and what **level of the participation** in them is; whether **everybody** has a possibility to be engaged in the **governing and representation** in respective bodies; whether there is **freedom of expression, information and association**; whether there the **elected individuals** are assured of **exercising their powers** and what exactly **self-governance and independence** at schools look like” p. 12. This could be further developed in order to strengthen the author's working definition.

One possibility could be another definition used by the author, this time about democracy in education, with reference to many educators: *In practice, democracy in education is based on empowered, autonomous and independent schools, teachers, head teachers, students and their parents. Democracy in education involves fostering openness to collaborative classroom practices and self-governance of students and teachers on equal footing, applying non-transmissive models of teaching, promoting the development of personal interests rather than a blind imitation of the curriculum or lesson scripts and appreciating the learning process rather than grading* (p. 13). Perhaps this definition can serve as an operationalised one, particularly because it is possible to follow its components in the RTT talks.

To be able to describe and conceptualise the event of RTT, the author has chosen a **case study** as a main research method. Data collection will produce accordingly “a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case” (p.16). Beata Zwierzynska believes that “by investigating very basics”, i.e. a documentation (transcripts) from the conversations, her research can gain “a more balanced narrative about the Solidarity myth and the stereotypical bad ‘commie’” (p.17). This I found very sound, however strangely, there is no discussion following this statement. At the same time, there is a risk that this belief could steer the presentation of the RTT narrative, particularly without any descriptive discussion to follow.

One and a half pages of the dissertation is about the data collection and analysis (p.17-18), which I found insufficient as far as methodology is concerned. To answer the first two questions, as a background for understanding the narratives during the RTT in the 1989, the author uses “an extensive literature review”, reading selected documents from the 1980s, as well as semi-structured or open interviews with those who were witnesses or participants to the event (chapter 2 and 3). One has to have in mind the fact that human memory can be unreliable after such a long time and referring to it can be risky. However, if there are numerous utterances about the same episode of the event they can help improve reliability. Still, these interviews need to get careful attention if one wants to achieve reliability. How it works in

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the thesis is unknown as this issue is not discussed, while ethical issues are considered, which is obviously positive (p. 21).

The **second** chapter presents the results concerning the political and pedagogical context of the RTT. For the international audience, this chapter provides an insight to some general comments on issues that happened in Poland between 1980-1989 as far as debates on school democratisation were concerned. It is based on thorough literature studies and interview material/data. The chapter finishes with table 2 which summarises the history of debates in three periods from 1980-1981; 1982-1986 to 1987-1989 and focuses on two items: *Teachers* and *Schools and the education system*. Although the table is quite difficult to follow, the chapter gives a very good overview of the period.

The **third** chapter (pp. 58-206) is a main contribution by firstly providing a detailed contextualisation of the talks on education. It includes “an outline of the main idea behind the talks” and is based on the literature review, the interviews with the witnesses and other persons. It sets the framework of the public scene. Secondly, by presenting the answer to the second research question based on four stenographic and audio records from the RTT, which are analysed by the thematic analysis (also called reflexive thematic analysis RTA) the author deals with the main issue of the thesis. The author uses a 6-stage guide provided by Braun & Clark (2006). Beata Zwierzyńska acknowledges the usefulness of “theoretical freedom” referring to by these two authors (*ibid.*, p. 81; see p.19), however, it is not clear what is meant by this. Braun & Clark state that “thematic analysis is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and therefore it can be used within different theoretical frameworks” (p. 81). They are not dismissing theoretical consideration in doing research, rather by using inductive analysis they do not aim to theorise the results (like in GT). But they underline “it is important that the theoretical position of a thematic analysis is made clear, as this is all too often left unspoken”. Unfortunately, this is the case with this thesis, as it lacks a theoretical position.

The first part of the chapter is well written and easy to follow; however, many events, facts and names can be difficult for non-Polish readers to follow and understand. Still, there is no solution to make it different to be able to give a full standing picture of historical value. I found, nevertheless, a troubling historical mistake on page 83 (footnote 81). It is about the historical origin of the Flying University during the partition time.¹ Just to give some facts: at the time of partition there was only Germanization in the Prussian part and Russification in the Russian part. However, it was only in the Austrian part

¹ cf. Bron-Wojciechowska & Bron, 1993; Wolert, 1930; Woloszyn 1964.

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where the Polish language at schools was allowed, and where the Jagiellonian University was functioning; Polish publishing houses and cultural centres were operating, and, what is more, in Vienna the Poles could become Members of Parliament. Publishing houses were used for illegal Polish publications from Russian and Prussian parts, spreading within those two regions afterward.

This part of the chapter deals with the characteristics of the participants of the sub-table concerning education. Those who attended the RTT represented the Solidarity party and the government coalition. The last group consisted also of the representatives of ZNP (the teacher trade union). To recruit proper delegates was important to be successful in negotiations. Thus, the Solidarity side represented those who were not militant either to the left or right (being in the middle), and a similar approach was taken into account where the government side was concerned. Moreover, the government coalition was recruited from the Ministry of Education that at that time was very progressive, as it appears from the thesis.

In the second part of the *third chapter* (pp. 93- 207) the main analysis of the talks is presented as a coherent narrative, partly chronological, and partly recursive and built on reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). This part is quite well written, but the analysis begins again with the meta-question: *Why are Polish schools still not fully democratised after more than 30 years of the democratic transition?* The author continues that this was a question which led her to read stenographic and audio records. This leading question, and still not an empirical one, included of course a main issue that democracy needs to be fully achieved also within the school system. I think this conviction can be a problem to start the analysis and needs to be discussed. Moreover, the RTA requires to come to the data open-minded, and as the author states, carry the thematic analysis by following a 6-stage guide. At the same time one can wonder why the RTA method was chosen and not a discourse analysis (DA). The author starts with “mapping new thematic regions in the extensive document”. But how this complex map developed is not clear enough. First, the author started with codes and from them established three main themes concerning the talks: 1. Teachers’ leading role in education; 2. Empowered teachers; and 2. Restructuring of schools and the education system. The author presents these one by one, describing how the themes emerged. Already the conclusion of the talks comes within the first theme i.e. the discussions were “consensual and complementary” (p. 95). Each theme is then divided into sub-themes and finding these themes was steered by the research question on: what main points and positions were taken up in the talks. They are presented in the following sections of the thesis. Each of the themes are

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filled with sub themes which are further divided into sub-sub-themes.² The talks are presented as very balanced with a reasonable and logical narrative, where utterances of each part are presented. The author's voice is 'heard' between the utterances to fill the gaps and make the narrative sound complete and smooth. We can also see how the participants wanted to reach an agreement, or how they in a way 'manipulated' the opponents to come to the agreement. Still, it seems sometimes that the talks just contain empty words and clichés, and are difficult to make sense of what they really meant, i.e. what was behind those words. Thus, the question still remains: Did they really understand each other?

The **fourth** chapter (pp. 207-219) continues the RTA analysis of the RTT on education relying on the stenographic and audio records, but this time the aim is to answer the third research question. Here the expectation of the reader is to follow an in-depth analysis allowing to learn how the participants of the RTT understood the issue of democratisation of the system including the school system. So, how did they do it? The analysis builds on three main themes: 1. Teachers' leading role in education; 2. Empowered teachers; and 2. Restructuring of schools and the education system, which was already presented in the previous chapter. Thus, it seems to be a repetition and not an in-depth understanding of how the participants understood democratisation. Based on the transcripts/quotes from the participants' parties I suppose that some understanding was still there, but latent or covered, so a kind of problematising would be necessary to be utilised here.

The **fifth** chapter consists of *Conclusions* (pp. 220-248), i.e. a summary of results, by answering the three research questions. The second question's results are summarised by the themes and sub-themes in the long table (4); and the third question's results again repeat the themes, but miss, in my opinion, a report from the in-depth analysis of how democratization of schools was understood by the RTT participants (Solidarity, and the government party-coalition). The author writes that she presents "selective and most distinctive outcomes of the talks – understanding of school democratisation" in the form of sliders first for the government coalition (11 sliders) and then for the Solidarity party (12 sliders). They are inspired by Schmitter & Karl. The author wrote "when the party was not interested or against a proposal, the slider is down; when a proposal was agreed but was not prioritised, the slider is in the middle; when an issue was prioritised the slider is raised", i.e. sliders show the impact of each proposal from strong, to weak or not important. Such a proposal, e.g. was "teachers' engagement in teachers' boards". This can be seen as a smart way of dealing with the issue of school democracy, but there is a

² The first theme is built around three sub-themes; the second around eight; and still the third includes three, while each of them includes several, e.g. Values and ideas as a sub-theme contains 12 sub-sub-themes; while the second sub-theme Issues for the reform contains as many as 16 sub-sub-themes

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danger involved in explaining the themes by the themes, in this case by proposals and their importance. Still, the author's own interpretation and discussion are missing. Moreover, it is unclear how the participants understood what democracy and a democratic school system is or can be.

Perhaps the relation of the themes to the notion of democracy would be more appropriate and related to the issue of what is a fundamental minimal characteristic of a democratic state.

The **sixth** chapter: *Concluding remarks* includes two pages (pp. 249-251). The chapter starts with the opening "meta-question" which again is: *Why are Polish schools still not fully democratised after more than 30 years of the democratic transition?* and the author declares that she was not able to answer it completely. It is not surprising at all, because first of all the question was of a rhetorical character, which means it is not possible to get an empirical answer. Second, this question considers a 30 years of not perfect democratic transition, and thus does not agree with the aim of the thesis. It was to cover the RTT and its setting starting from 1981 to 1989, and not what happened after that. To be able to discuss the process of Poland becoming a democracy, however, the author could perhaps seek support in such projects as the Democracy Matrix project (www.democracymatrix.com) or Democracy Report 2021 by V-Dem.net, which are led by political scientists who continually assess the level of democracy in the world. Poland, as not being a full democracy, can only be called a Deficient or Electoral Democracy.

Remarkably this chapter brings an anecdote to the fore concerning one non-state school. Finally, another rhetorical question appears: *Why Solidarity's Ministry of Education was not successful in a more liberal school democratization*, which follows the same logic as above. Again, this was not the issue of the thesis and could not be empirically examined. Here the author relates to two Polish authors i.e. Kwieciski and Sliwierski, (supposedly well-known educationists in the Polish academia), who are also often quoted and referred to in the thesis. However, their works are neither influential or substantial to the Polish³ nor to the Western political scientists and sociologists and thus their use in this thesis should be better explained. Using more prominent works, such as e.g. Marcin Krol's, could bring the studied phenomenon, i.e. democratisation of schools, to a more general level, perhaps.

Why not make a real conclusion and analysis of the RTT impact, or the lack of impact, on the democratization of school? What were the barriers and obstacles from the beginning and later on? Here the discussion on the role of the so called social schools; centralised and decentralised educational systems; the role of the state and civil society in the educational policy; the separation of the state and

³ The interesting Polish philosopher and sociologist dealing with issue of democracy in Poland was Marcin Krol (1989; 2015 *Pora na demokracje*). He also translated important books dealing with democracy from English.

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the school system from the church, and secularization of the programmes, all together the role of the Church (as a part of civil society) and Catholic religion, could be possible. For example, one important classical author would be the British sociologist Margaret Archer⁴ (1979) with her book on governance of education and centralised and decentralised schools in four countries (England, Denmark, France and Russia), in a historical perspective up to now. Perhaps this could be the next step in the candidate's research career in the number of articles: to re-visit the data and concentrate on what happened after in the democratic state school system. One could also look at issues of critical thinking, justice and equality, which are absent in the thesis. Moreover, in the further research the author could also focus on an analysis of the teachers' role more thoroughly, which actually starts already in the last sentence of the *Concluding remarks*.

The author's analysis of the RTT seems to bring to the fore an impression that the partners agreed on the main issues concerning: the leading role of the teachers in a democratic school; the empowerment of them; and to reform the school and educational system (even if the Solidarity side wanted to carry it from scratch, while the government-coalition by following achievements done on the way). Perhaps this was the beginning for the split. Nevertheless, and according to the analysis, the two sides were very close to each other.

The thesis final section is the *Epilogue* (pp. 251-252), which is based on two interviews: with Zbigniew Kwiecinski and Danuta Kuron (Jacek Kuron's wife). From them we can come to the conclusion that there was a double split between the Solidarity (in a new Government) and the government-coalition. The report on *Education as a National Priority* was not of any use, whatsoever, for the new government as it represented the previous regime. The second split was between various factions within Solidarity, the liberal and more to the left in this case. (But strangely Kuron was in the first government after the election.) This double split is left without any comment from the author. The state needs to be reformed to be able to establish well-functioning schools that can fit to carry on democratic education and education in democracy. It seems that schools need to be democratic first, then society will follow. However, democracy does not work like that. I wonder: What was left behind (was hidden under the surface) during the RTT, which could bloom later?

⁴ Archer, M. (1979/2013). *Social Origins of Educational Systems*

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Finally, let me add some positive remarks. The thesis, which is written in English, can reach the international audience and contribute to a better understanding of the democratic transition of the Polish educational policy and system.

The authors participation in the European PhD school (the EDiTE) was sponsored by the EU, and the subject, which can be of interest to the general public, is concerned with the question of educational policies especially in new democracies of “Eastern” or Central Europe. This is a contribution to the history of Solidarity movement; as well as a summary of the history of the period between 1981-89 as far as educational policy is concerned; the study is an attempt of re-examining how the prerequisite and foundation to start educational reform after 1989 was set up and how the debate regarding the democratisation of school proceeded and could be understood. Historically, this study is also important as the first comprehensive account and thematic analysis of the RTT regarding general education.

There are some shortcomings, however. The opening question is not helping the investigation, but leads us astray. It makes it difficult for the author to be just an observer on the scene and still makes it difficult to learn objectively how the round table participants comprehended or reflected on the process itself, and thus, how they understood democracy.

Democracy and democratisation is based on the author's vision of what it is and what it is not; a kind of a utopian vision without looking for the limitations of democracy. The thesis is entirely based on the vast literature, but mostly on the Polish authors (and of course they can serve as a background to understand the process which is fine). But the thesis does not bring sociological and political science literature about theoretical views on democracy in the West to be able to compare with or relate to the Polish authors. If the intent of the author was to frame democracy from a Polish perspective, a clearly articulated working definition was missing, and thus not allowing this to show through. Therefore, it would seem more beneficial for the study, if the author used a greater multitude of definitions (both Polish and international) to better frame her study and also provide it with a more comparable and comprehensive view of what is meant by democracy and democratisation.

And finally, some language issues. The thesis is well written in English, and what is more, the British English language is used, however not consistently enough, e.g. using the phrase ‘high school’ instead of ‘secondary school’; curricula and curriculums can be used – but one has to be consistent. However, the reference list follows an odd Polish custom as Bibliography, and the Polish publications are not given their English translations.

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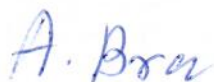
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Despite some criticism, I find this dissertation extremely interesting, with a large amount of data and impressive material, providing us with the picture and narrative of what was going on during the RTT on education, and giving credits to all participating parties.

Finally, and in conclusion: In the light of assessments presented above, I conclude that reviewed dissertation by Beata Zwierzyńska's MA, SCHOOL DEMOCRATISATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROUND TABLE TALKS ON EDUCATION, under the supervision of Professor Dr. Ewa Kurantowicz, meets the statutory requirements for a doctoral dissertation (both in terms of content and form). Therefore, I am applying for the admission of Beata Zwierzyńska, MA to further stages of the doctoral dissertation and to public defence.

W świetle wszystkich wyżej przedstawionych opinii i ocen stwierdzam, że recenzowana rozprawa magister Beaty Zwierzyńskiej pt.: SCHOOL DEMOCRATISATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROUND TABLE TALKS ON EDUCATION pod kierunkiem Prof. DSV dr hab. Ewy Kurantowicz, spełnia ustawowe wymagania stawiane pracy doktorskiej (zarówno pod względem merytorycznym, jak i formalnym). Wniosuję zatem o dopuszczenie mgr Beaty Zwierzyńskiej do dalszych etapów przewodu doktorskiego i do publicznej obrony.

Stockholm, 13 December, 2021



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