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(R)EVOLUTIONARY TEACHERS

For years, education in Polish schools has been in a constant state of upheaval, undergoing wave after wave of reforms. Yet, the real transformation is happening quietly, from the bottom up. We need to encourage project-based thinking that empowers teachers with both courage and agency.

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New technologies – especially the recent surge in artificial intelligence – are reshaping how we work, relax, and even think. The sheer scale and speed of these changes are overwhelming, and the pressure to adapt rapidly can be anxiety-inducing. While businesses often have the flexibility to embrace technological shifts, schools face their own unique challenges. Why so? The problem lies in how we think about education: we are often looking backward instead of forward. We focus on sweeping, system-wide reforms but overlook a crucial element for success – providing comprehensive support to educators.

In my years of working closely with teachers, I've seen the daily struggles they face. I firmly believe that meaningful change in education can only come if we empower teachers and help them build confidence in their roles. This does not mean dramatic overhauls – real progress comes through a gradual evolution of the profession. That's what will ultimately make a lasting difference in schools.

The carousel of change

If there's anything constant in the Polish education system, it's perpetual change. Over the years, the system has undergone a series of revolutions. Let's begin with the introduction of separate middle schools (*gymnasia*) in 1999, which established a three-tier education structure: primary schools (6 years), middle schools (3 years), and high schools (3 years). The goal of this reform was to equalize educational opportunities, improve the quality of teaching, and better pre-

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> I believe that real change in education is possible through comprehensive support for teachers, empowering them with courage.

pare students for professional and social life. Next came another major shift in 2009, with the implementation of a new national curriculum. This reform aimed to put greater emphasis on developing key skills like critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. Most importantly, it introduced new standardized external exams to align with the updated curriculum.

Next, having introduced middle schools only in 1999, Poland decided to abolish them 18 years later, in 2017. The aim was to simplify the education system and, of course, to improve the quality of education. Other significant changes included the introduction of a new high school final exam (*matura*), adjustments to the eighth-grade exam in 2019, and a reform of vocational education, which introduced a dual system combining classroom learning with hands-on training in businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a shift to remote learning, yet another revolution. Rapidly transitioning to this new mode of education required significant investments in technological infrastructure. In the most recent revolution of 2024, homework was eliminated from public schools.

What do all these educational reforms have in common? Each aimed to bring about meaningful structural, curricular, or organizational changes, meant to better prepare students for the demands of the modern world. Yet, each of these changes also sparked controversy and required substantial logistical – and often costly – adjustments in schools.

A grassroots transformation

Some teachers have struggled with each of these top-down reforms. While some adapted more quickly, many, regardless of the revolutionary changes, have continued their own grassroots (r)evolution. These teachers truly are the unsung heroes of the ongoing transformation in education. Slowly, at their own pace, they pursue the mission of improving the quality of teaching and better preparing students for the challenges of the modern world. Together, they are creating a grassroots transformation in education.

In a 2008 article published in the journal *e-flux*, Irit Rogoff proposed redefining education in the context of art and the humanities. Rogoff presents education as a process that goes beyond traditional institutional and pedagogical frameworks. She emphasizes that education should be seen as an active process of engagement and participation, one that not only conveys knowledge but also inspires critical thinking,

creativity, and social transformation. Rogoff argues that education should be a space for experimentation, where knowledge is not simply transmitted in a one-sided manner but is co-created by both teachers and students. She highlights the importance of dialogue, interaction, and mutual influence as key elements of the educational process.

Rogoff's vision of education places great emphasis on its dynamic and ever-changing nature, encouraging a constant rethinking and transformation of traditional teaching and learning methods. According to Rogoff, education is not just the transfer of knowledge; it is, above all, a process of creative engagement and critical reflection, with the potential to transform individuals and societies.

This grassroots evolution, led by teachers, is precisely what is reshaping schools and adapting them to a changing world. It's embodied by teachers who are no longer tied to tradition and conventional methods of instruction. Such teachers perceive their students' specific needs, talents, and limitations and adapt lessons. They are not afraid to go beyond the prescribed curriculum and are courageous enough to experiment with new materials. These are teachers who are willing to take students beyond the walls of the classroom, undeterred by negative opinions from parents or colleagues, because they are squarely focused on the well-being of their students.

Design thinking

Everyone is looking for the perfect formula for education – a method that supports both students and teachers. The truth is, there is not just one but many solutions, because there are many challenges and individual needs. However, one method definitely worth exploring is known as *design thinking*. It's no surprise this approach has become so popular in recent years – it is particularly effective in addressing complex, open-ended problems, where multiple solutions are possible. Tim Brown, co-founder of the consulting firm IDEO and a champion of design thinking, describes it as a "human-centered" approach to innovation, since it focuses on the user, with their needs at the heart of the process. The design thinking method is made up of six key stages:

1. empathizing,
2. defining the problem,
3. generating ideas,
4. prototyping,
5. testing,
6. implementing.

Design thinking was born at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design in Stanford, California, where instructors realized that people's creativity does not need to be built up from scratch. Rather, people already have imaginations and the ability to come up with new ideas – they just need help discovering and harnessing those skills.

Educational psychology professor Paul Kirschner identifies three key competencies that teachers must have:

1. Teachers should be specialists in the subject matter they teach.
2. Teachers should be experts in pedagogical methods, with knowledge of how learning occurs in different contexts.
3. Teachers should be adept at designing educational experiences.

In other words, teachers need to know what and how they want to teach and have the skills to practically implement their teaching strategies. These activities are similar to the typical work of a designer. This is why the design thinking approach is well-suited for use in schools.

Creative courage

A teacher is the ideal designer of learning experiences, capable of creating an environment that encourages students to put in the effort. But can a teacher really rearrange the classroom? Interestingly, most participants in my design thinking workshops identify space as one of the main problems to solve. It's almost every educator's dream to change the "set" of their work environment – teachers design prototypes for classrooms, school corridors, and staff rooms. However, there are often obstacles: a lack of funding, the need for approval from administrators or parents, or the fear of criticism from other teachers. The design thinking method equips teachers with what its creators call "creative courage" – the confidence in their ability to effect meaningful change in the world around them.

One teacher who participated in my project decided, along with her school students, to completely redesign their learning space. After finalizing the prototype, she organized several meetings to present the ideas, bringing in parents, fellow teachers, school administrators, the local mayor, and even businesses from the area. With the help of a student's father, who happened to be a carpenter, they were able to modify some of the furniture. A local company donated nearly new, comfortable couches and bean bags. The mayor supported the initiative by allowing the teacher and her students to raise funds for their dream classroom during a family picnic.

> *Design thinking* equips teachers with a competency called "creative courage" – a belief in their own ability to bring about change.

Changing physical space is just one way to apply the design thinking method. The teachers I've worked with have also changed how they teach their lessons. For example, one early-education teacher at a rural school decided to get rid of the traditional school bell during her classes. Breaks are now taken whenever students need them. Other teachers in the school quickly adopted this idea and applied it in their own classrooms. Another teacher expanded the learning environment beyond the classroom, involving the entire school. She and her third-grade students created an "escape room" game for the first graders, filled with tasks and puzzles. The whole school community, including the administration and maintenance staff, became involved in this unconventional lesson.

Is design thinking the solution to all the problems in the education system? Certainly not. But it does effectively support teachers (and, indirectly, students) in developing the skills they need to drive grassroots change. Its versatility makes it a powerful tool for implementing lasting modifications in both learning methods and approaches to education. ■

Further reading:

Kelly T., Kelly D., *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*, 2013.

Okraj Z., *Design thinking, inspiracje dla dydaktyki* [Design Thinking: Inspiration for Teaching], 2020.