

Constructivism in the Shadow of Centralism: The transformative potential of international programmes in early childhood education in Poland as an escape from authoritarianism

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Abstract

This study examines the role of international education the Primary Years Programme (PYP), in mitigating authoritarian tendencies within Poland's early childhood education (ECE) system. Employing qualitative content analysis of legislation and media reports, the research examines how these programmes apply constructivist theory and seeks to provide an option to overly centralised education systems. The study shows that such international programmes promote active learning where the students are of great importance as opposed to authoritarian classroom cultures that often rely on pedagogical dictators. Results show that the Polish education system is gradually incorporating more topical and constructivist facets, especially in the context of early childhood education institutions, a trend that is being registered in legal reforms. The application of dual curricula within international schools is also noteworthy as it combines international and local educational requirements. This method offers an alternative approach that is less rigid and beneficial as it would not totally resist the internationalization of education. The study ends with a positive assessment of externally oriented programmes providing necessary mechanisms for educational reform in Poland in the prevailing conditions of change in the teaching environment.

Keywords

international curriculum, international schools, constructivism, early childhood education in Poland

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1. Introduction

Education systems around the world are influenced by a mix of national policies, teaching theories, and what society expects. In places where the government has tight control over education, schools often mirror the political mindset. This can lead to strict, teacher-focused methods that limit creativity or critical thinking. Authoritarian education systems usually emphasize following rules, obedience, and sameness, which can suppress students' natural curiosity and hinder the growth of important

skills like leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving.

In contrast, constructivist educational theories, especially those developed by Piaget and Vygotsky, focus on active, student-centred learning. Here, students build knowledge through their own experiences and interactions. Programmes like the Primary Years Programme (PYP) are based on a constructivist approach to teaching. They highlight active learning, critical thinking, and working together to solve problems, providing students with strong

foundational tools to handle complex social and political situations.

In Poland, a country with a historically centralised education system, recent developments have opened new possibilities for integrating constructivist principles into early childhood education (ECE). As the national education system undergoes gradual reforms, a notable trend has emerged: the rising popularity of international schools and curricula, particularly the PYP, as alternatives to traditional public schools. These international programmes, which emphasize active learning, social collaboration, and individualization, provide a more flexible and progressive educational experience.

The significance of international programmes in the Polish context becomes apparent when considering the contrast between their approach and that of the national curriculum. While authoritarian regimes often control the national curriculum and prioritize conformity and obedience in education, constructivism assumes participatory approaches in curriculum development. Teachers in international programmes have greater involvement in deciding on teaching content, outcomes, and evaluation methods. This bottom-up approach starkly contrasts with the top-down, ministry-level decision-making characteristics of authoritarian educational policies (Zajda, 2021a; Leek, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that teachers in Poland feel suppressed by the national curriculum, leading some to switch to international programmes such as the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge International Programme (Leek & Sliwerski, 2024; Leek, 2022). These programmes are increasingly perceived as a refuge from the authoritarian tendencies of the national

curriculum, offering students and teachers an opportunity to engage with more dynamic and personalized approaches to learning. Schools that adopt international curricula are seen as islands of educational resistance against authoritarian policies in national education (Leek, 2022). This study seeks to explore the role of international education programmes in transforming early childhood education in Poland. Specifically, it investigates how the PYP, with its foundation in constructivist pedagogy, addresses the challenges posed by centralized educational policies. By analysing legal documents, media discourse, and educational standards, the study examines how international programmes contribute to active learning by developing practical competencies and fostering social and communication skills. Additionally, this research highlights the dual curriculum model adopted by international schools. This model blends national requirements with global best practices to create a more holistic and individualized educational framework. This approach provides a flexible alternative that potentially counteracts authoritarian policies while benefiting from global educational trends.

The study addresses three primary research questions: (1) What are the main characteristics of the PYP, and how is it perceived in the context of education in countries with authoritarian education policies? (2) How is the Polish education system evolving in the context of moving away from authoritarianism and introducing constructivist elements, especially at the level of ECE? (3) What are the characteristics and conditions of implementing a dual curriculum (national and international) in ECE in Poland in the context of international schools? To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology to examine legal documents pertaining to Polish education policy

and media discourse surrounding international schools. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the formal policy landscape and public perceptions of international education programmes in Poland.

The findings are relevant in the current educational climate, where increasing centralisation of the Polish national curriculum raises concerns about the suppression of student agency and critical thinking. International programmes like the PYP challenge traditional authoritarian models and provide a path towards a more inclusive and empowering educational experience by offering an alternative that prioritizes student engagement, creativity, and independence. An investigation of these issues contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform, policy transfer, and the role of international curricula in national education systems. This research offers insights into how countries can navigate the complex terrain of educational policy in an increasingly globalised world while addressing local needs and challenges. The study thus contributes to ongoing debates about educational reform and the role of international programmes in fostering innovation and resistance to authoritarianism in education.

2. Early childhood education in Poland – between the constructivist approach and authoritarian policy

Constructivism

Constructivism is defined as a theory of learning and meaning creation that provides an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how people learn (Ültanır, 2012). Constructing knowledge refers to how a person gets to know and tries to understand the surrounding world. The theory states that people construct

knowledge and their understanding of the world by experiencing things and reflecting on these experiences (Akpan et al, 2020). Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are described as the creators of the foundations of constructivism (Klus-Stanska, 2018). There have been calls to avoid using the term "constructivism" and say "constructivisms" (Raskin, 2002). The two most important trends in the theory of constructivism are cognitive constructivism and social constructivism (Kalina & Powell, 2009). Cognitive constructivism comes directly from Piaget's work. People construct their own knowledge (Piaget, 1953). Piaget explained the importance of understanding that each person learns at their own pace (Kalina & Powell, 2009). In turn, social constructivism comes from the theory of Lev Vygotsky, who believed that knowledge is constructed through dialogue and interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Although these theories developed in parallel, they share a common paradigm (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). The common part is the claim that people construct knowledge as opposed to discovering it (Boghossion, 2006). Constructivism understood as a learning theory is not an instructional strategy (Ültanır, 2012). Learning is a development that requires the learner to be creative and to put effort into the planning and organization process. According to Fosnot (2013), the general principles of learning from a constructivist perspective are that students should enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and feel free to ask questions, create hypotheses, consider possible solutions, work in small groups, and conduct discussions. Constructivist learning involves the development of reasoning, critical thinking, and the understanding and application of knowledge (Driscoll & Burner, 2005). It is important to enable practical actions. Related to this, is the perception that making mistakes in the learning process is integral to learning (Fosnot, 2013). People as

meaning creators strive to organise and generalise experiences in a representational form. Allowing time for reflection provides the foundation for developing the learning process. In turn, working in groups enables dialogue within the classroom community and interaction that encourages further development (Churcher, Downs & Tewksbury, 2014). At school, a lesson should be about creating teaching opportunities thanks to which students can learn new things while referring to the knowledge they already have (Kalina & Powell, 2009). The teacher's role is to relate to pupils and take their characteristics and predispositions into account. Individualisation concerns not only what is to happen in the teaching process but also accepting the very particular nature of knowledge that pupils have already constructed.

Authoritarian policies within education

In recent decades, concerns have arisen regarding democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations, exemplified by the ascendance of political parties propagating illiberal agendas in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Diamond, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Snyder, 2018; Rupnik, 2018; Enyedi, 2018; Kelemen, 2017). This phenomenon has fueled apprehensions about a potential reversal of democratic trends in the region (Diamond 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Snyder, 2018). One manifestation of this trend is the accession to power of parties espousing illiberal ideologies, not only in Poland, Hungary, and Serbia, but also in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and most recently, the Czech Republic (Rupnik, 2018; Enyedi, 2018; Kelemen, 2017; Mounk, 2018). Notably, Poland has witnessed a decline in academic freedom, particularly since the Law and Justice Party assumed governance in 2015 (Sata & Karolewski, 2020).

Authoritarian neoliberal regimes (Ryan, 2019; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Gallo, 2021) tend to centralise control over educational institutions, thereby diminishing their autonomy and academic freedom (Tansel, 2017). A primary mechanism through which authoritarian governments assert their influence in education is by controlling and manipulating curricula to align with their ideological narratives, often promoting nationalist or populist perspectives while suppressing alternative viewpoints (Enyedi, 2018). This can lead to indoctrination and the stifling of critical thinking, undermining intellectual freedom and academic integrity (Rupnik, 2018). Furthermore, authoritarian policies frequently restrict academic freedom, subjecting scholars, researchers, and educators to censorship, intimidation, or even persecution for expressing dissenting views (Rupnik, 2018). This chilling effect can impede intellectual discourse, hinder knowledge advancement, and compromise educational quality. Authoritarian regimes typically favour centralised control over educational systems, diminishing the autonomy of individual institutions and decision-making bodies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This centralisation can lead to a top-down approach to policymaking, with decisions imposed without meaningful consultation or input from educators, students, and other stakeholders. Moreover, authoritarian policies in education often emphasize conformity and obedience to authority figures and established norms (Altemeyer, 1996; Feldman, 2003), discouraging critical questioning or dissent. This approach can stifle creativity, independent thinking, and the development of critical reasoning skills essential for a well-rounded education. The rise of authoritarian tendencies in certain countries can also have implications for international education and collaboration, as institutions and educators operating in authoritarian contexts may face restrictions or limitations in their

ability to engage with global academic communities, participate in research collaborations, or access educational resources (Mounk, 2018). This can hinder the exchange of knowledge, limit cross-cultural understanding, and diminish the quality of education globally.

Early child education in Poland, i.e. the national curriculum and international curriculum Primary Years Programme

Educational reform, which included ECE, began in Poland under the influence of a radical change in the socio-political system. During the transition to democracy, ECE was designed, implemented, cancelled, and questioned by successive governments (Sliwerski, 2012). Despite the initiation of changes in the wave of democratic transformation, the initial intentions were not achieved because the educational system was made partisan, the decentralisation of education was suspended, social control of parents over school activities was not introduced, education and school pseudo-government was created, and the autonomy of teachers, students and parents was limited (Sliwerski, 2011). ECE is subordinated to the Ministry of Education, which has become politicised and subordinated to the ideology of subsequent authorities. Sliwerski (2012) believes that subordination to the Ministry of Education is a factor in the erosion of social capital in Poland. The regulations consist in centrally prepared documents which apply throughout the country.

Early school education in Poland covers the first three grades of primary school. Under the Education Law of December 14, 2026, Journal of Laws 2017 item 59, a child's schooling obligation begins in the calendar year in which the child turns 7. So, during this period, one starts primary school. This is preceded by one year of compulsory kindergarten preparation in

a kindergarten or a kindergarten section at school. Primary schools provide a first stage of integrated education. The primary school teaching system in grades I-III involves transitioning from pre-school education to school education within the subject system. ECE teachers conduct classes according to a plan they set and can adjust the time of classes and breaks to suit the activity of pupils. In integrated education in grades I-III, there are no separate teaching subjects, and no point grades should be given. Descriptive assessments should be made.

There are several influential education policies. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 14, 2017 is a document that specifies the core curriculum applicable in kindergartens and schools. It provides details on the core curriculum for pre-school education and the core curriculum for general education for primary schools, including for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for a first-cycle vocational school, general education for a special school preparing for work and general education for a post-secondary school, OJ of 2017, item 356, (Regulation, 2017) hereinafter referred to as the Core Curriculum (CC). This document was prepared as a regulation defining the core curriculum applicable in schools and kindergartens in Poland. The Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of July 25, 2019 on the standard of education to prepare for the teaching profession, Journal of Laws item 1450 (Regulation, 2019), hereinafter referred to as the Education Standards (ES), constitutes the basis for educating future teachers in Poland. Under annexe number 2, point 1.3. of this regulation, the studies have the character of uniform master's studies. The total number of hours of classes, including professional practice, is 2,860. Education requirements to prepare for the profession of a

teacher of kindergarten and early school education (grades I–III of primary school) include substantive preparation and pedagogical preparation, including didactic, psychological and pedagogical preparation. During their studies, students are required to complete 240 hours of professional practice. These regulations apply to the entire country.

This is a manifestation of authoritarianism in education by setting education standards from above. However, analysing these documents in detail makes it possible to find fragments that fit into the constructivist discourse. In teacher education in Poland, two areas related to the constructivist approach that are emphasised. The dominant definition is social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which is manifested in the development of cooperation, communication, working in groups and understanding the cultural context (Regulation, 2017). Teacher education emphasises the importance of creating a good atmosphere for communication in the kindergarten group and school classroom and beyond, as well as recognizing the specificity of the local and regional environment and their impact on the functioning of children (Regulation, 2019). Social constructivism emphasises the constructed nature not only of social reality, but also understands construction as a never-ending process, not as solitary but rather as interactive (Pfadenhaueris & Knoblauch, 2019). The second area is related to cognitive constructivism, which states that knowledge is constructed individually (Kalina & Powell, 2009). The regulations (2017, 2019) repeatedly emphasise individualism, both in the teacher education process and in the CC for grades I–III. The education process that prepares one for the profession of a kindergarten and early schoolteacher (grades I–III of primary school) is individualised (Regulation, 2019).

In Poland, in addition to schools that follow the national curriculum (NC), there are some offering international programmes. The official website of the International Baccalaureate (IB) provides information that in Poland in 2024, 9 schools were offering the Primary Years Programme (<https://www.ibo.org/country/PL/>). The IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) is intended for children aged 3–12, i.e., also for students in early school education. PYP is transdisciplinary because having recognised how young children learn, the PYP model moves learning across different disciplines. The framework serves as the curriculum organiser and offers an in-depth guide to achieve authentic conceptual inquiry-based learning that is engaging, significant, challenging and relevant for PYP students. In PYP, the goal is to achieve authentic learning based on conceptual inquiry. Through inquiry and reflection on their learning, PYP students master skills, and construct knowledge and gain understanding of concepts. Constructivist and social-constructivist learning theories emphasise drawing on and building on students' needs, activity, and curiosity (<https://www.ibo.org/programmes/primary-years-programme/curriculum/>). The schools employ ECE teachers who have Polish pedagogical qualifications. According to Educational Law (2016), ECE is conducted in two ways. A dual-core curriculum is being introduced in schools; the Polish one alongside the international core. NC is interwoven with the international curriculum (IC).

The table 1. shows the number of schools with international programmes in Poland. The table contains information about the number of public and non-public schools, in addition to the number of schools that offer individual international programmes.

Table 1. IB schools in Poland (as of 07.2024)

Level	Number of Schools in total	Public Schools	Non-Public Schools
Primary Years Programme (PYP)	9	-	9
Middle Years Programme (MYP)	16	9	7
Diploma Programme (DP)	42	24	18
Career-Related Programme (CP)	-	-	-

Source: own study

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To examine the international school programmes in terms of the role they play in mitigating authoritarianism within ECE in Poland, the following research question has been posted:

What constructivist functions within international programs mitigate authoritarianism within ECE in Poland?

Our specific questions were:

- What are the main characteristics of the PYP, and how is it perceived in the context of education in countries with authoritarian education policies?
- How is the Polish education system evolving in the context of moving away from authoritarianism and introducing

constructivist elements, especially at the level of ECE?

- What are the characteristics and conditions of implementing a dual curriculum (national and international) in ECE in Poland in the context of international schools?

To answer these questions, we followed the media discourse regarding international schools in Poland. In our research, we used document analysis (Bowen, 2009), which we understand as a systematic procedure for reviewing and assessing printed and electronic materials. The materials included government documents, laws, and regulations (Flick, 2013). The research procedure consisted of searching, selecting, assessing, and synthesising information in documents (Labuschagne, 2003). As a result, we received fragments of data, i.e., quotations, which were grouped into categories. The matters of interest we searched for in government documents for this study concerned the constructivist approach in education. Two important documents were analysed. The first one was the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 July 2019, on the standard of education required for the teaching profession, Journal of Laws, item 1450, hereinafter referred to as Education Standards (ES). The second document is the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017, on the core curriculum for pre-school education and the core curriculum for general education for primary schools, which includes catering to the needs of pupils with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for vocational and technical school of the first degree, general education for a special school preparing pupils for work and general education for a post-secondary school, Journal of Laws of 2017, item 356, hereinafter referred to as the Core Curriculum (CC). Both

legal acts are in force nationwide, which shows how strongly centralised educational policy is in Poland, including the policy regarding ECE.

We also refer to the media discourse concerning schools following international curricula. Media discourse applies to interactions that take place via a transmitting platform (O’Keeffe, 2013). For the purposes of these studies, these are written texts in which information is addressed to an absent reader. Media discourse is taken to mean a form of interaction that is publicly produced and simultaneously recorded. (O’Keeffe, 2013). That is why we analysed public press materials. The search criterion was information about international schools, and 103 articles were collected in the first stage. After the initial analysis, the research material was supplemented with a theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2015; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021), i.e. additional research materials were sought that allowed us to complete the categories and enabled the creation of new ones. The research consisted of constant comparison of collected materials, codes, and research notes to formulate the well-established theory of media discourse in international schools. Table 2. shows the number of domestic and regional articles published in given years.

Year of publication	National coverage	Regional coverage	Total
2002	1	2	3
2003	-	1	1
2004	-	-	-
2005	-	2	2
2006	-	1	1
2007	-	-	-
2008	-	-	-
2009	-	2	2
2010	1	-	1
2011	2	2	4
2012	3	1	4
2013	1	1	2
2014	-	3	3
2015	3	1	4

2016	4	5	9
2017	1	4	5
2018	2	6	8
2019	4	6	10
2020	5	4	9
2021	5	4	9
2022	8	7	15
2023	13	16	29
Total	53	68	121

Source: own study

Table 2. Number of articles in 2002-2023

During the study, 121 press articles about international schools in Poland were collected. The first article was published in 2002, and the latest texts are from the end of 2023 (see Table 2). A marked increase in interest in this topic has been seen each year. In 2023, 29 articles were published. Fifty-three articles (43.8%) were national, and 68 (56.2%) were regional. Most of the articles appeared in regional media, but thanks to online publication, they were available to every reader. We assigned identification codes (DW, DGP) to individual newspapers and numbers to individual articles (DW21, DWR4). The research material was subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis examined written material, i.e. press articles (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). This method is used to study various forms of communication and involves coding and comparing emerging types of transmitted content. In the case of this study, the unit of analysis was individual press articles. Codes and then categories were extracted through a process of repeated reading. The study focuses on qualitative meaning derived from topics discussed in media discourses on international schools in Poland. The codes we found related to issues addressed in the articles are: social interactions, communication, cooperation, individualisation in the teaching-learning process, active learning, development of practical competencies, responsibility for one’s

education, and avoid a centrally controlled educational policy.

These codes were combined into a category we called constructivism in ECE, based upon the topics discussed in press articles. This category appeared in 25% of the articles. Within this category, we distinguished three subcategories: “Emphasis on active learning and the development of practical competencies”, “Collaboration and social interaction” and “Individualization and adaptation of teaching to the individual needs of students”. These subcategories correspond to the ones identified in the document analysis. Being an active student, taking care of self-development, or feeling responsible for one's development were included in the first subcategory. If part of the article concerned cooperation between students and teachers, building cooperation skills among students, and peer tutoring, it was included in the second subcategory. Any issues regarding an individual approach to the student in the educational process fall into the third category. Additionally, we identified in media discourse categories called “International schools in Poland as an alternative” and “The rise in popularity of international schools as a response to parental concerns”.

4. Results

Emphasis on active learning and the development of practical competencies

In the CC, references to constructivist discourse can be found in the defined tasks of the school, which emphasise active learning and the development of practical competencies.

The duty of a school in the sphere of early school education includes 1) supporting the child's multidirectional

activity by organising educational situations enabling experimentation and acquisition of experience, polysensory cognition, stimulating development in all areas; 2) organising play, learning and rest, including students developing in a disharmonious, slower or accelerated way; 3) supporting: the child's activity and developing learning mechanisms leading to independence; 4) selecting a curriculum adapted to the level of children's development and their individual needs; 5) implementation of a curriculum that respects and supports their natural individual development and supports individuality and cooperation within a group; (CC)

The school's tasks are intended to enable the acquisition of experience and learning through play and experimentation gained from involvement in practical activities. The student should have the opportunity to engage in their activity while at the same time understanding the purpose of this activity. Spontaneous behaviour of children is described in the Education Standards (ES) as educational and didactic situations. A teacher should be able to:

1.2. (...); 9) identify spontaneous behaviours of children as educational and didactic situations and use them in the education process and the implementation of therapeutic goals; (ES)

The teacher's task is not only to encourage students to act, but also to capture children's spontaneous activity, follow it and use it in the education process.

Unable to get interest from educational publishers, she directly marketed it “pretending”

that there was a company called Teaching Strategies (Dodge, 2023). Ultimately Teaching Strategies developed CC texts for supervisors, professional developers, and teachers (Dodge & Godhammer, 1988; Dodge et al., 1988; Dodge et al., 2000; Dodge et al., 2002; Dombo et al., 1997), including an assessment called the CC *Developmental Continuum Assessment System* [Developmental Continuum], which rested on teachers' documented observations and focused, ongoing collection of work samples illustrating children's development in areas like language and literacy, mathematics, social and emotional development (Dodge et al., 2001). The Developmental Continuum is the predecessor of the GOLD assessment announced as a part of the Bright Starts initiative. By 2023 Teaching Strategies called the CC "the most widely used preschool program in the nation" (Teaching Strategies, 2023).

Collaboration and social interaction

In terms of social competencies, the future teacher should be able to take into account the cultural context in accordance with point 1.3 of ES.

1.3. In terms of social competencies, a teacher is ready to: (...); 4) work in a team, performing various roles in it and cooperating with specialists, parents or guardians of children and other members of the school and local community; 5) communicating with people from different backgrounds, solving conflicts through dialogue and creating a good atmosphere for communication; 6) recognising the specificity of the local and regional environment and their impact on the functioning of children; (ES)

Emphasising the need to build social competencies related to working in local and regional environments that have their specificity can be related to social constructionism. Social constructionism draws attention to the supra-individual mechanism of assigning meaning, co-created jointly through cooperation in a given environment. In other words, teachers are to learn how to cooperate effectively with the surrounding environment, accounting for its specificity. In turn, CC describes the skills developed by students at school as the acquisition of social competencies.

The most important skills developed as part of general education in primary school are: (...); 6) teamwork and social activity; 7) active participation in the cultural life of the school, the local community and the country. (CC)

In the part regarding skills developed during primary school education, teamwork and social activity are highlighted. In the subsequent parts of CC, the concept of teamwork is expanded to include the acquisition of communication competencies, and organizational and management skills.

The acquisition of social competencies such as communication and cooperation in a group, participation in team or individual projects, as well as organization and management of projects, is of great importance for a student's development and success in adult life. (CC)

Teamwork returns as the one during which students develop socially, communicatively and creatively.

The use of the project method helps develop students' entrepreneurship and creativity and enables the use of

innovative programmes. The project method assumes significant independence and responsibility of participants, which creates conditions for pupils to individually manage the learning process. It supports the integration of the class team, learning problem-solving, active listening and effective communication, and strengthens their self-esteem. (CC)

In this fragment, the teacher is defined as a supervisor who enables students to work in teams, while ensuring that they can act independently and responsibly within these teams. The use of the project method is intended to enable students to learn how to plan their work, be independent and self-assess. Further on in CC, it is noted that the content implemented using the project method may be selected by students. This means following students' interests. In addition to teamwork, both documents contain references to the individual treatment of students.

Individualization and adaptation of teaching to the individual needs of students

Constructivism emphasises individualisation in the educational process.

3.1. The education process that prepares people for early school teaching (grades I–III of primary school) is individualised. (...); (ES)

The education process is to be an individualised process, starting with the diagnosis of the student's strengths and weaknesses as a future teacher of preschool and early school education. The student's task is to plan self-development with the support of academic teachers and develop the ability to reflect on their pedagogical activities and personal responsibility for their own education.

4.1. The internship aims to familiarise the student with the organisation of work of a kindergarten, school (...) to enable the student to shape and develop teaching and educational skills in direct contact with pupils and to evaluate his or her own predispositions to perform in the teaching profession. (ES)

Future teachers, as in the constructivist discourse, are expected to support pupils' comprehensive development, taking into account their individual capabilities, needs and interests. Teachers should be aware of the individual characteristics of the children they will work with.

1.2. The teacher can: (...); 2) recognise the needs, capabilities and talents of children and conduct pedagogical activities, plan, implement and evaluate personalised education; 3) use various ways of organising the learning and teaching, taking into account the specific needs of individual children; (ES)

References to constructivist discourse can be found in the skill requirements for graduates of pedagogical studies. The teacher is expected to prepare personalised education and teaching programmes. The need to adapt the school to all children who develop inharmoniously is emphasised. The school's tasks, in accordance with point 7, include organising classes:

- a) adapted to the intellectual needs and developmental expectations of children, evoking curiosity, wonder and joy in discovering knowledge, b) enabling the acquisition of experience through play, performing scientific experiments, exploring, conducting research, solving*

problems to the extent appropriate to the possibilities and developmental needs at a given stage and taking into account the individual capabilities of each child, (CC)

Despite the use of the word "discovering" knowledge, not constructing it, it is recommended that classes are organised in such a way as to arouse curiosity, joy and amazement in children, which is characteristic of activating methods. There is some inconsistency, given a constructivist perspective, in the use of terms such as knowledge discovery and knowledge building. Discovering knowledge suggests that it is given from the outside and building that students build it on their own, constructing knowledge differently.

International schools in Poland as an alternative

The analysis of media discourse on international schools emphasises issues related to active learning and the development of practical competencies, cooperation and care for social interactions, and individualisation in the teaching-learning process. Schools joining international programmes apply for accreditation, which takes about 2 years. Receiving such an accreditation is perceived as a mark of success and increases the prestige of a given school.

"This is a great success and a unique achievement on a national scale," says the principal. "I am proud of our team; we took up the challenge and achieved the demanding standards set for PYP. These standards include a curriculum based on experiment, combining theory with practice, focusing on the child's social and emotional needs and developing his or her language

competencies. The lack of grades is also characteristic" (GW21).

Institutions that follow international education programmes organise school functions to promote active learning and develop practical competencies to create opportunities for cooperation and establish social interactions. In the media discourse, the international programme is described as based on practical activities and related to the needs of the child. Hence, one of the functions of the school is to individualise teaching. The emphasis on developing language competencies is implemented through English lessons conducted, for example, by native speakers. Parents who choose these institutions cite the opportunity to learn English from an early age as the reason. This distinguishes institutions with an international programme from schools with NC. Being an alternative institution is related to building students' sense of agency and effectiveness. As in the constructivist discourse, the student's sense of responsibility for their educational process is emphasised.

PYP, implemented in the first stage, is aimed at the youngest students. The new teaching method will cover kindergarten and grades one through four. The school is also planning to abandon the traditional method of grading (GWR4).

Implementing PYP may offer an alternative in terms of assessment. Instead of the traditional digital system (in Poland, students receive grades from 1 to 6, where 1 is the lowest grade and 6 is the highest grade), students can also receive grades in a descriptive form.

Students gain knowledge through inquiry, research and asking questions,

and are encouraged to think critically and take action for the benefit of the school and local communities (GW21).

The school principal describes the activities carried out by children in PYP as active activities, inquiry, research, asking questions, i.e. becoming young scientists. Here, a constructivist approach to education is visible, which is to be based on practical activities.

More and more parents are deciding to enrol their children in international schools. In addition to implementing the core curriculum, such institutions focus on developing practical skills in their students, which pays off significantly in adult life (GW34).

Schools with an international programme are perceived by parents as institutions where, in addition to theoretical knowledge, you can acquire practical skills.

In international schools, in addition to traditional subjects, students are exposed to activities supporting the development of so-called soft skills that are a prerequisite in the labour market today. Instead of weakening enthusiasm for learning, international schools show students how fascinating acquiring knowledge can be (GW34).

Rise in popularity of international schools as a response to parental concerns

There is an increase in interest in private schools in Poland. Previously, parents perceived private schools as providing additional opportunities, for example, more hours of English in the programme and fewer students per class.

Parents used to choose private and charter schools because they offered something extra. They sent their children to private primary schools to make it easier for them to get used to school because classes were smaller and there were extra classes on-site so they did not have to travel to attend them. Nevertheless, children often returned to public high school after private primary school. There was no belief then that they would have a worse education there. And now parents are clearly worried that public schools won't provide a good enough education. It's not about something extra, but about stable learning. This is the fundamental difference that worries me. People who can afford it, but also people with high social capital are fleeing. And this is done to the detriment of public education (GW29).

Currently, increasing numbers of people are transferring their children to private schools to protect them from the centrally controlled educational policy, which in the opinion of parents, under the previous government imposed too much and whose content excluded certain social groups.

Parents were afraid of overcrowded schools, learning in shifts, the chaos that is easier to control in a small school than in a large one, and a lower quality of education in overcrowded classes", the councilor notes. (...) "Another reason is the „Lex Czarnek". Private schools will be able to maintain some independence and parents hope that they will not be susceptible to ideological content coming from the educational authorities (GW29).

Not all schools can maintain independence in a centrally controlled educational policy filled with ideological content. According to parents, this is easier to do in private schools or schools with international programmes, which generally follow the values promoted by the European Union.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The first question that we posed in the study refers to the main characteristics of the PYP and how it is perceived in the context of countries with authoritarian education policies. The research findings indicate that the PYP is grounded in cognitive and social constructivism, emphasizing student-centred learning. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional teacher-centred methods, which are often criticized for stifling critical thinking and creativity, particularly in contexts where authoritarian educational policies prevail (Greaves & Bahous, 2021; Cade et al., 2022). In environments characterized by such policies, the development of essential skills like decision-making and leadership may be hindered (Rupnik, 2018). Consequently, schools implementing the PYP are viewed as viable alternatives to those adhering strictly to the national curriculum, offering a more independent and progressive educational experience. The constructivist framework of the PYP aligns well with the principles of child-centered education, which has been widely recognized for its positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. Research has consistently shown that student-centered approaches foster deeper learning and critical thinking skills (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Schiro, 2013). In contrast, authoritarian educational systems often prioritise conformity and obedience, which can lead to a lack of critical

engagement among students (Feldman, 2003). Moreover, the findings suggest that international programmes like the PYP provide a refuge for educators and students seeking to escape the constraints of authoritarian policies. This aligns with recent studies highlighting the role of international curricula in promoting educational innovation and resistance against oppressive educational frameworks (Leek, 2022). For instance, Zajda (2021b) notes that such programmes encourage a participatory approach to curriculum development, allowing educators to engage more meaningfully with their students' needs and interests. Additionally, the emphasis on collaborative learning within the PYP framework resonates with Vygotsky's social constructivism, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). This aspect is particularly important in ECE, where social skills and collaborative problem-solving are critical for holistic development (Kalina & Powell, 2009).

The second research question refers to the evolution of the Polish education system as it moves away from authoritarianism and introduces constructivist elements. The research highlights a slow but notable shift in the Polish education system from an authoritarian model to a more constructivist approach, particularly in ECE. This transition is reflected in legal documents that, while maintaining a unified educational framework, increasingly emphasise individualised teaching and the need for teachers to adapt to students' specific predispositions. This gradual shift in the Polish education system towards constructivism, particularly at the ECE level, is indicative of a broader educational transformation that aligns with modern pedagogical theories. Constructivism, as emphasised by educational theorists like Piaget and Vygotsky, suggests that

learning is an active, student-centered process where individuals construct knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with the world (Kalina & Powell, 2009). This approach stands in contrast to the traditional authoritarian model, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and students are passive recipients.

In Poland, the legal framework is slowly evolving to support this shift. The emphasis on individualised teaching and the adaptation of instructional methods to suit the needs of individual students reflects a recognition of the diverse learning styles and abilities present in the classroom. This change is particularly important in the context of ECE, where early educational experiences can have a profound impact on a child's cognitive and social development. However, the transition to a fully constructivist approach is not without challenges. The centralised nature of the Polish education system, which still imposes a common perspective in many areas, may limit the extent to which constructivist principles can be implemented. The balance between maintaining national educational standards and allowing for individualisation in teaching is delicate, and the success of this shift will depend on how well teachers can navigate these potentially conflicting demands. Comparatively, countries like Singapore and China have faced significant challenges in implementing constructivist education. In Singapore, the education system remains highly centralised and performance-oriented, which can stifle the adoption of more flexible, student-centered teaching methods (Weng & Li, 2020). In China, despite top-down mandates for educational reform, the persistence of traditional teaching methods has hindered the effective implementation of constructivist practices, particularly in ECE (Yin et al., 2020). Poland's gradual approach to

integrating constructivism may offer a more sustainable path forward. By allowing teachers greater freedom in selecting content and adapting their teaching methods, the Polish system is slowly creating an environment where constructivist principles can thrive. This gradual shift may also allow for the necessary professional development and support systems to be put in place, ensuring that teachers are equipped to implement these changes effectively.

The last research question concerns a distinctive feature of ECE in Poland within international schools is the implementation of a dual curriculum—national and international. This dual approach, which has been shaped by national policies and the influence of global educational trends, creates a unique space for the blending and borrowing of educational practices. While nation-states remain prominent actors in education policy transfer, the role of local and international non-governmental organisations, foreign agencies, consultants, and international corporations is becoming increasingly crucial (Forestier & Crossley, 2015). The concept of a "policy window" (Kingdon, 2003) is particularly pertinent in understanding the rise and appeal of international programmes in Poland's current educational landscape. As the country experiences democratic backsliding and increased centralisation of the education system, a window of opportunity has opened for alternative approaches. This phenomenon aligns with the theory that external references can serve as catalysts for implementing reforms that might otherwise face domestic resistance (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

The origins of this dual approach can be traced back to the collapse of the Socialist bloc, which precipitated drastic changes in all spheres of life. Despite not being initially prioritised, post-socialist governments and intellectuals

attempted to initiate discussions about new education goals, contents, methods, and systems (Silova, 2009). During this period of uncertainty and inexperience, Western international curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate (introduced in 1993), became agents of lesson drawing and policy transfer (Silova & Brehm, 2010). Education policy transfer can occur in response to problems or to justify planned policies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). In the Polish context, international programmes, with their emphasis on constructivist principles, have found receptive audiences among parents and educators seeking alternatives to the authoritarian tendencies in national education policies. This dual curriculum approach allows for the integration of international and national policies, creating a more comprehensive educational framework that potentially mitigates the impact of authoritarian policies while benefiting from global educational trends. The dual curriculum model in Polish international schools, which merges national and international educational standards, represents an innovative response to the challenges posed by authoritarian educational policies. This blending of curricula not only allows for the preservation of national educational identity but also introduces global best practices, which can enhance critical thinking, creativity, and the development of global competencies (Forestier & Crossley, 2015). The presence of international programmes within a national curriculum framework provides an alternative educational pathway that can resist the centralising tendencies of authoritarian regimes by promoting student agency and a broader worldview (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). In addition, the "policy window" concept (Kingdon, 2003) is crucial for understanding how such educational reforms can be introduced and sustained even in politically challenging environments. The flexibility offered by international programmes

like the International Baccalaureate has allowed educators in Poland to navigate and sometimes circumvent restrictive national policies. This flexibility is essential in contexts where educational policy is tightly controlled by the state, as it offers opportunities for innovation and the introduction of pedagogical practices that might otherwise be suppressed (Silova & Brehm, 2010). The historical context provided by the collapse of the Socialist bloc and the subsequent educational reforms underscores the importance of external influences in shaping national education systems (Silova, 2009). The adoption of international curricula in Poland can be seen as a continuation of this trend, where external models are adapted to local contexts, offering a means of reform that aligns with global educational standards while addressing local needs (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

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