

**Arts Integration in Polish Education and Culture**

**Amy L. Oestreicher**

***For “Arts Integration Across Cultures” Keynote Presentation***

**November 2015**

### **The Value of Arts Integration**

Arts integration is incredibly important in education. As sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz notes, "Art does not solve problems, but makes us aware of their existence." (Smith 2009) It is also associated "gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skill. [and can strengthen] motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork." (Smith 2009) But in other cultures susceptible to different environmental circumstances and funding, the arts are not always given the proper emphasis it deserves. At the time when Michael Dabrowski attended public school in Warsaw Poland, the arts were severely neglected while a textbook approach to the hard sciences was emphasized. This caused Michael to excel in selected areas while lose in others. Michael Dabrowski attended school in Poland until he was nine years old when he moved to America, and then he moved from his home in New Jersey back to Warsaw Poland for just six months, solely because his parents did not want him to forget the culture and language of Poland. After six months, he moved back to New Jersey where he remained in school there.

### **Communist Influence in Poland**

Michael was in Poland for very tumultuous times. After the labor strike in 1980 (Davies, 1975), and independent trade union called "Solidarity" formed, which was an anti-communist socialist movement to counteract the blaring oppression of communism at that time. In 1981, martial law was imposed as an attempt to break down Solidarity. Life was in shambles and Poland faced a severe economic crisis. Food was rationed and many Polish people tried to flee Poland in search of better jobs. Michael remembers very few kids who had any kind of wealth. The single child who's father owned a VCR was

an extreme rarity. Michael's parents had a phone because he lived in an apartment building with 70 apartments, yet his parents were one of two families that had a phone. Communism began to lose its members as economic chaos ensued. The first non-communist party formed in Poland towards the end of 1989. But from 1945 until this time, communism held dominance over what was then called the Polish People's Republic.

### **The Education System**

The educational system is mandatory for children between seven and 18. Children attend kindergarten at age three and all schooling starts a year earlier than in America. Polish students complete at least one year of education before Primary school at age seven. This schooling - *szkola podstawowa* – lasts until the 13-year-old student is in sixth grade. Lower secondary school (*gymnasium*) is for grades seven, eight and nine. Then, the students can choose between various secondary schools, including four years of a technical high school or vocational high school, or a general high school (three years).

*(Education In Poland)*

When Michael grew up in Poland, communism was very prevalent. When he moved back briefly at age 12, communism was beginning to crumble, but was still a dominant influence in society. When communism ruled Poland, education was utilized to structure society, and was managed by the Ministry of National Education, who determined the course content, textbooks, standards for admission, how the school operated, and how the schools within Poland interacted with each other. The

superintendents controlled the personnel policy and other institutions in the area, which were educational. Education was also in crisis along with Poland's other social problems, and the Polish United Worker's Party kept changing and controlling the education system until they were finally voted out of office in 1989. (Curtis, 1992)

### *Polish Culture and the Classroom*

In Michael's experience, communism discouraged arts and culture both in and out of his schooling. Polish culture itself is rich with art, history, language, holidays, literature and music. From the Royal Castle in Warsaw to the Krakow School of Historicist painting developed by Jan Matejko, Chopin's beautiful musical compositions to the poetic works of Jan Kochanowski (*Education In Poland, 2014*), the arts are what make Poland a defining cultural presence. Yet, Michael has very few memories of Polish culture in his life. Starting with school, his classroom environment had simple posters and textbooks. There was very little interaction between teacher and students. Class would consist of the teacher standing at the front of the classroom and lecturing the students while they studied their textbooks. Michael's education heavily emphasized the hard sciences such as math and biology, to the point that once he arrived in America, he was helping the teacher instruct math and science because he was so far ahead. This was also helped due to the fact that Polish children start their schooling a full year earlier than American children. When Michael came back to Poland in fifth grade, the communist oppression had gotten minimally better, but was still prominent. Michael compared the communism culture to that of China, where you just sit in front of the book "and learn the facts or else."

Michael remembers walking into an American classroom for the first time and feeling as though he was in an entirely different world. The biggest difference was the idea of individual desks. In Poland, two people would share a desk, so the idea of an individual identity in the classroom, with one's own personal possessions, felt extremely foreign. In America, the student had a voice. They could volunteer, ask questions, and make a mark with their opinion in interactive projects. In Poland, Michael remarked, "It was that teachers way or highway, no way in between. The teachers had a VERY powerful role. The parents had no recourse with the teacher in Poland; it wasn't like you could go to a teacher if the parents had a complaint, no PTA." There was no night where the parents attended school to meet with teachers and understand the material, and no way for the parents to become involved within the school or subject. Michael's own parents were very involved in his schooling because they recognized the value of education. Once their learned for themselves what their boundaries were in terms of schooling, they gladly assisted him with homework and asked him about his day.

### **Polish View of School**

A prominent difference in Poland is that school is not also considered a "social event" as in America, so his parents never realized that school was a social experience or opportunity to make friends – it was a communist country where they were trying to survive and make due with what they had, whereas in America, there are a plethora of opportunities that double as also social opportunities such as after-school clubs. With very little money, it never occurred to his parents once they moved to America to buy

him decent clothes for school because in Poland this was not a substantial issue. So from a social standpoint, it was hard for him to fit in in America. This was in 1986, and communist regime lasted until 1989.

Further emphasizing a lack of social emphasis in Poland, there was no designated lunch break or cafeteria in schools. Until fourth grade, you would pull out your lunch from home in class, while the teacher kept instructing. This resembled more of a “lunch break” at work than a special lunch period for children to decompress and socialize. Seeing the American lunch environment of students forgetting about their studies for 40 minutes and eating outside was an “eye-opening experience.” The activity centered on a “break” from academia was physical education, which was 30-40 minutes daily. Though regimented on a daily basis, there was no formal P.E. class or a teacher. This period consisted of the boys playing soccer on the field and the girls hanging out in the grass, resembling more of an elongated recess period. The children were very homogenous – all white, and all very physically fit. There were cliques in his public school, but they were generally all made up of the same white demographic.

### **America: A Different Culture**

When Michael first moved to New Jersey at eight years old, he was surprised by the mix of students in his school. Suddenly, he was attending class with Asians, Blacks, Indians, and Jews – who he had never been exposed to. Another way he had trouble fitting in is that he tried to be friends with everybody because “he didn’t

know any better.” Yet the cliques in America were more tightly formed, so Michael was rejected when each clique did not understand why he did not stick with his “own kind.”

Another new experience was the introduction of music into his schooling – an idea completely foreign to him in Poland. He started playing the trumpet in fourth grade, which felt very abnormal, because in Poland, there was not even a music class. There was an art class, but there were very minimal supplies, “if anything”, and the class was extremely informal. From what he could remember, art class consisted of quickly drawing something, then the boys playing soccer on the field while the girls came up to the boys and said, “The teacher would like to know what grade you think you should get on your drawing.” Michael was unable to think of any specific art project he was ever assigned in Poland, and there were never enough supplies. Art was clearly very minimally funded, but at that time, funding was scarce for education in Poland, as well as everything else. Currently, educational are attempting to cater more to the needs of local communities. As of this current year, elementary and middle schools will be financed by local governments, high schools will be financed by provincial governments, and higher education will still remain within nation-wide budget expenditures. (*Educational System in Poland, 2014*)

### **Arts Exposure in Communist Poland**

Textbooks were the focus of Polish education, and the entire population of Poland is extremely literate. The textbooks were not necessarily up to date, and one could draw a parallel between the fear that Putin is currently “rewriting the history of Russia” via its textbooks to the close monitoring of material in the Polish textbooks when Michael was

studying. When Michael moved to America, he felt very ahead of all his students in academic subjects, but he never developed any interest for the arts. He does remember his mother culturing him as a child by taking him to operas because she loved music, but he fell asleep as a child. Other than that, he has minimal memories of the arts surrounding his childhood. The other large art influence in his life was his dad's taste for music. His father would play many records like Pink Floyd and other Western bands from the era, because his grandfather traveled frequently to the Middle East which at that point was very culturally moderate, so there was a lot of western presence there. His grandfather would bring records back for his father, which prompted Michael's own interest. However, with communism keeping a close watch, these items were available only through the black market. Michael has a memory of going with his uncle to a flea market and purchasing his first cassette, Michael Jackson.

When asked about arts culture being a presence in his friends' home, he remarked that arts weren't a big part of anything. Going on, he remarked, "I have the point of view from a 8-9 year old and then a 12 year old. There was just limited accessibility to all of that because of communism, and then when I came back, communism had fell a little bit, but it was still limited, when Poland was under communist rule it was under Russian communist rules." Poland was allowed it's sovereignty but it was controlled by the Russians. In fact, by the time he returned to Poland, Russian had become a basic second language. In the effort to separate his identity from communism, his mother was so against Michael learning Russian, that she had forbid him to study it in school, so his schedule consisted of an extra study hall period rather than a language. English was also

minimally taught, if anything. To quote Michael, “Here’s my extent of learning English in Poland: I knew blue and red, but I thought blue was red and red was blue. So basically there was nothing.”

### **Communist Effects on the Arts and Economy**

Communist drastically affected the emphasis of the arts, and also the economy. Once communist rule overtook Poland in 1948, it operated by state-run, Soviet-based model controlled by the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance. (Poland: A Handbook, 1977) His parents were well educated and had good jobs, well educated, but would still have to wait on line with food stamps waiting for the daily allocation of meat and bread. Michael reflected, “my mom told me when I was 3 or 4 I told her “I promise I’ll be a good boy if we don't have to stand in this line anymore” – so it was not a good life – till there was Martial law in Poland – it was a tough environment to live in.” Yet, life still went on for Michael as best as it could: “As a kid, you don't know. Everything is relative. You go to school, play soccer, hang out, climb trees, get yourself in trouble, ride a bike, that’s life, you’re pretty satisfied.” He did not feel personally constricted by the imposing government and since it did not directly affect him as far as he knew, he didn’t have an opinion at the time. However, under communist rule, politics affected literature which now served as communist propaganda, and many lauded Polish works became inaccessible to the public. The entire media was controlled by the government, including publishing, theatres, films and museums, with an office “in all television and radio stations, press and publishing houses, film and theatre studios, and printing works throughout the country.” (Poland: A Handbook, 1977) It was only when Michael arrived

in New Jersey that he felt how the presence of the arts can affect the dynamics of a school education.

### **Polish Culture, Communism and Holidays**

Another big cultural factor Michael remembers is holidays, namely Easter and Christmas. Although communist discouraged religion in schools and his family was not religious, Christmas took on an aesthetic purpose. He remembers decorating his tree with sentimental, precious, homemade ornaments and even remembers art projects making different kinds of ribbons for the tree – “from an art standpoint I remember that vividly.” Even in school, the students made these ribbon art projects, despite the communist government opposition to religion.

### **Polish Media and Culture**

It was difficult to experience any kind of Polish culture that was not infiltrated by the government at that time. He owned a television set, but there were only two channels that were entirely government controlled. There were children-oriented programs but nothing like the Disney Channel, and more like communist based propaganda cartoons. There were movies, but the cinemas were so rare that there were only a handful in Warsaw, so it was more like going to the opera, where you would attend with your parents once in a blue moon, rather than a teenager’s social activity. There were no western movies, and only Polish actors and Polish-made films. Michael vaguely remembers a good friend touring in a musical group that resembled the Mickey Mouse Club, but did not really remember much “color” and “life” in the Polish world of media.

Poland has a national anthem, but it was never played in school, reserved just for official ceremonies, like a soccer match going on or other major sporting event that was on an international scale. He thought it was strange initially when America played the anthem both in school and at every event, rather than a special occasion. Michael's own last name is in the anthem because the lyrics talk about the General Dabrowski who is marching back from Italy where he has had victories to come and defend Poland.

Michael remembers watching many soccer matches on television, which was the major sport there besides Ping-Pong. Besides sports, Michael remembers other games serving as social opportunity. He described a complex but handmade game that did implement artistic and creative skills: "You'd take bottle caps from something like a Coca-Cola glass bottle – the Polish drinks were all in those kinds of bottles. You take the bottle caps, and then you'd take a rubber ring from another soda bottle, you'd flip it upside down, then you'd draw a flag envelope on a piece of paper, you'd wrap it in plastic wrap and then put it back on the bottle cap, and then you and your friends would actually draw a huge soccer field, and you'd have your own "soccer team" and it was a huge deal – you'd lay it all day and all night until your parents yelled at you to come back it. In America, they'd look at you like you were crazy." But Michael continued to play in New Jersey with some Polish children in the area, although there were not many Polish children directly around him.

### **Differences in American and Polish School Perspectives**

Eventually, Michael found his place in the American school system, although the hugest culture shock was coming from a completely homogenous society to suddenly having his first taste of multiculturalism. Racial differences were a new concept to Michael. This major change along with the change of how heavily the arts were integrated into his New Jersey curriculum was a major adjustment for him. Coming from a communist schooling system, “Arts were not really my thing.” I asked him if he things he never took a liking to the arts because of his lack of exposure. He responded that his sister is extremely arts oriented and always was. However, She is five years younger than Michael, meaning that when he was eight, she was three years old, so she lacked the bias that Michael had, which makes all the difference.

### **Effects of Arts Integration (or lack thereof)**

Drawing conclusions, Michael said the biggest comparison he can draw is the emphasis (or lack thereof) on the arts and the sciences, and also the huge difference in the social aspects – both in the makeup of the student body and how school was regarded socially versus academically. Though Michael is working successfully in finances now, currently, the Polish schooling system is undergoing drastic reform. According to the Educational, Audiovisual, and Culture, Executive Agency, the Polish curriculum aims to emphasize, “The development of pupils’ individual ‘capabilities’, ‘skills’, ‘interests’ and ‘aptitudes’ [referred to] in connection with cultural factors linked to creativity.” (*Jan 2009*) In Poland, this was implemented starting from the 2009-2010 school year. Now, there are many separate subjects, including chemistry, history and music. There are also

broader areas of study like the sciences, humanities and arts. For the first time, Poland has introduced “reading education” as well as “reading and media education.”

### **Changes in Polish Education & Arts Integration**

Now, Polish schools are even encouraging “partnerships between schools and professional artists and/or arts organisations.” (*Jan, 2009*) “Education, Research and Youth has drawn up a 'Strategy for the development of extra-curricular and school-based educational activities'. This strategy is based on the idea that extra-curricular activities are beneficial to the entire education process, and in particular to personal development.” (*Jan, 2009*) Finally, extra-curricular activities are now a mainstay in Polish schools. In primary education, specialist teachers are employed afterwards to ensure this. This new core curriculum started in September 2009 and promises the wonderful integration of the arts in Polish schooling and consequently, in society.

Speaking with Michael Dabrowski, I learned the value of integrating arts and culture in school and in one’s daily life. In a closely controlled communist regime, very minimal stimulation is let in or allowed to be expressed, so the point where he does not know if he would have taken a liking to it, had he been exposed to it as such a young age as his younger sister. Although Michael has gone on to be a successful individual, all students should have the opportunity to learn about the arts and culture of their upbringing. And even despite the lack of art and music in his schooling, Michael still has fond memories of his mother taking him to Polish operas, seeing Polish films, and even art-making in order to celebrate the joys of Christmas. And even when I visited him in Arizona last Christmas, I had the pleasure decorating the tree with beautiful handmade

ornaments and ribbons, staying true to his cultural roots and tapping into what arts integration he *was* able to hold onto from his own childhood. The arts play an extremely significant part of daily life for all cultures, and despite communist ruling, Michael still experiences certain joys of the arts, which he still carries out today.

*Annotated Bibliography*

*Amy Oestreicher*

*Polish Educational System – Arts Integration*

Culture of Poland. (2014, October 30). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_of\\_Poland](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Poland)

This article described in detail the very long history of Polish arts and culture. It outlined the history of Poland starting from the medieval ages, to the Renaissance period, through the Enlightenment, to the origins of the People's Republic of Poland, all the way until the current time period. The various aspects of the rich Polish culture include the language, the cuisine and the wonderful Polish delicacies, the landmarks of Poland and the history of Polish architecture and what defines the culture's building structures. Also described in great detail is the fine art of Poland. Prominent Polish artists were written about and their most famous works as well as prestigious art schools in Poland. This country also has an extremely diverse taste in music, and most surprisingly, they are extremely famous for their heavy metal and "death metal" music. The great Polish literary works were named as well as the lives of the authors, who come from many different religions and background. Some were put in exile while some were wildly celebrated, even being given the Nobel Peace prize in 1942. This article will be extremely helpful to me as background for the era my subject was growing up in. This will supplement his own personal history of the culture he witnessed growing up in Poland.

Davies, Norman (2005). *God's Playground, a History of Poland: 1795 to the Present*. Columbia University Press. p. 434. [ISBN 978-0-231-12819-3](https://www.isbn-international.org/view/title/978-0-231-12819-3).

Educational system in Poland. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.slideshare.net/kstrzeminska/educational-system-in-poland-35132483>

Education in Poland. (2011, August 9). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from [http://www.theglobalvillage.dk/education\\_in\\_poland.htm](http://www.theglobalvillage.dk/education_in_poland.htm)

This article helpfully contrasts the old system of education in Poland with the new system with clear visual maps showing which form of education leads to what. In Poland, the students can go to a vocational school or a technical university in the older system. In the new system, there is a matura examination, a competence test and placement test. The education of Polish students will often end at age 16. Also, the statewide commission offers high school diplomas to students. Universities and technical colleges offer five-year aster degree programs. There are many reforms currently happening in Poland. One of them attempts to alter the salary that teachers earn. The aspiration of the educational reforms is to "be more responsive to the needs of the communities." This article will be very informative for my paper because it describes the Polish government's attempts to cater to the needs of the communities and continually undergo reform. In this way, I will see what the Polish educational system truly values.

Education in Poland. (2014, September 26). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_Poland](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Poland)

Education and Schools in Poland. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.expatarrivals.com/poland/education-and-schools-in-poland>

Encyclopedia of the Nations. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Poland-EDUCATION.html>

Curtis, Glenn, ed. *Poland: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992

How Are K-12 Schools Different In Poland Compared To the U.S.? (2013, June 5). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/employment/esl/poland/>

This article clearly defines how Polish schools K-12 differ from the same grades in the U.S. For example, while American children start kindergarten at age 5-6, Polish children usually do not enroll until age 7. Although the middle school component for both countries is three years, once the students get to high school, the system differs drastically. Polish students have the option of choosing between general lyceum, a vocational education and a technical secondary school. This all depends on the type of examination that the Polish student takes. In Polish schools, students are required to learn two languages, which can be English, German, Spanish, Latin, French, etc. Also, while American students have the choice of which examination they want to take in order to determine what higher education school they enroll in, it is determined for the Polish student what kind of school they need to study in based on their high school examinations. This will be helpful in my final paper when I am contrasting the differences between the educational systems in the U.S. with the educational system in Poland.

Jan, F. (2009). *Arts and Cultural Education at School in Europe*. (ISBN 978-92-9201-061-4).

Kubilius, K. (2007, February 6). In *Polish Culture*.

McEvoy, D. (2011). *Poland*. Greenville, SC: Michelin;.

Migrant EN. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from [http://migrant.info.pl/Types\\_of\\_schools\\_in\\_Poland.html](http://migrant.info.pl/Types_of_schools_in_Poland.html)

This article explained the current education system in Poland. It describes in detail the differences between kindergarten, primary school, gymnasium (the lower secondary school), and secondary school. For Kindergarten, there are certain requirements such as paperwork, and foreign children and accepted on the same basis as

Polish children. The Polish school system is currently in flux and changing ages of certain grades, but “zero form” are special preparation classes that can be in either primary schools or kindergartens. These classes are currently subject to change. The article also explained the specific documents required to enroll children in schools, as well as how the school days were divided between subjects and specific curriculum. Then, the National Examination Commission’s specific tests were explained. This article was particularly helpful in discerning the exact differences between each level of schooling in terms of curriculum, requirements and formal examinations. This will be helpful to me when contrasting the school system now with the formal school system when my subject was enrolled.

Poland: A Handbook (1977; originally published in Polish, 2nd ed., 1977), is a comprehensive reference source written by Polish authors and published in Poland for readership outside the country. Glenn E. Curtis (ed.)

Poland - EDUCATION. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://countrystudies.us/poland/42.htm>

The Polish School System. (2004, April 11). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from [http://www.partners-in-education.com/pages/poland/The\\_Polish\\_School\\_System.html](http://www.partners-in-education.com/pages/poland/The_Polish_School_System.html)

This article primarily focuses on the specific changes that the Polish school system has underwent and is still undergoing. Through a helpful visual map, it is clearly defined how a Polish citizen might work their way from pre-school eventually to their doctorate studies. Surprisingly, the current educational system was only introduced in 1998-1999 so the learning environment will be notable different than when my subject was attending school there. The students that have passed the final examination, called “matura”, can continue to their college studies. In the primary studies, students have the opportunity to choose from arts-related courses like crafts, art and music, as well as other studies such as technology and physical education. Post-secondary education is for those who aspire to be nurses, accountants, etc. Polish students eventually have a wide range of schools to choose to apply to such as undergraduate universities, economic academies, polytechnic universities and agricultural academies. This article will be very helpful in describing the process of education in Poland and the opportunities a student has from grade to grade.

Ryzhkov, V. (2013, November 8). Putin's Distorted History | Opinion. Retrieved November 13, 2014, from <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/putins-distorted-history/489799.html>

Smith, F. (2009, January 28). Why Arts Education Is Crucial, and Who's Doing It Best. Retrieved November 15, 2014, from <http://www.edutopia.org/arts-music-curriculum-child-development>

