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***The Finnish Model of Inclusive Education –
an Unmatched Ideal or a Viable Model of Good Practice?
Fiński model edukacji włączającej –
niedościgniony ideał czy realny wzór dobrych praktyk?***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The research presented here was aimed at finding out Polish teachers' perspectives on the Finnish education model, which is widely regarded as exemplary, and to assess the feasibility of applying its principles to the Polish education system, particularly in relation to inclusive education.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The study focused on three main questions: What factors characterizing the Finnish education system are relevant to the quality of inclusive education? Which of these factors are already present in the Polish education system? Which factors from the Finnish model should be implemented in the Polish education system? The study involved 258 Polish teachers and utilized a quantitative approach, employing a diagnostic survey method, a questionnaire technique, and a self-developed survey questionnaire.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The analysis focused on identifying the barriers to inclusive education based on recent research and the changes needed to improve the effectiveness of the Polish education system. This evaluation was grounded in a comparison with the key characteristics of the Finnish system and its relevant solutions.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The results indicate that the key areas for improvement, according to the respondents, are the professional preparation of teachers, efforts to raise the prestige of the teaching profession, and improvements in working conditions, particularly those related to school climate.

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CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: The Finnish education system is not only effective but also inclusive of all students. As such, its solutions can serve as a model for Polish teachers and policymakers as they work towards making the Polish education system more inclusive. Implementing the study's findings may contribute to improving the Polish education system and fostering its inclusiveness.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, FINNISH EDUCATION SYSTEM, TEACHERS' OPINIONS, OPTIMIZATION OF EDUCATION**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Prezentowane badania miały na celu poznanie opinii polskich nauczycieli na temat uznawanego powszechnie za wzorcowy fiński model edukacji i możliwości wdrożenia jego założeń do systemu polskiego w perspektywie idei edukacji włączającej.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Badanie koncentrowało się wokół trzech głównych problemów: Jakie znaczenie dla jakości edukacji włączającej mają czynniki charakteryzujące fiński system edukacji? Jakie czynniki charakteryzujące fiński system edukacji funkcjonują w systemie polskim? Jakie czynniki charakteryzujące system fiński warto implementować do polskiego systemu edukacji? W badaniu wzięło udział 258 polskich nauczycieli. Zastosowano podejście ilościowe, wykorzystując metodę sondażu diagnostycznego, technikę ankiety oraz kwestionariusz ankiety w opracowaniu własnym.

PROCES WYWODU: Podstawę dla analizy barier edukacji włączającej, na które wskazują wyniki prowadzonych w ostatnich latach badań, jak również zmian koniecznych dla poprawy efektywności polskiego systemu edukacji, stanowiła charakterystyka systemu fińskiego i właściwych dla niego rozwiązań.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Badania ujawniają, że kluczowe obszary wymagające zmiany to według respondentów: przygotowanie zawodowe nauczycieli, działania na rzecz podniesienia prestiżu zawodu nauczyciela oraz poprawa warunków pracy, w tym związanych z klimatem szkoły.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPLYWU BADAŃ: Fiński system edukacji jest nie tylko skuteczny, ale także nastawiony na włączanie wszystkich uczniów. Dlatego rozwiązania proponowane w systemie fińskim mogą służyć jako wzór dla polskich nauczycieli oraz dla polityków, określających rolę i kształt edukacji, która coraz bardziej otwiera się na ideę włączania. Zaimplementowanie wniosków z badań może przyczynić się do poprawy polskiego systemu edukacji i sprzyjać jego inkluzyjności.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **EDUKACJA WŁĄCZAJĄCA, BARIERY EDUKACJI WŁĄCZAJĄCEJ, FIŃSKI SYSTEM EDUKACJI, OPINIE NAUCZYCIELI, OPTYMALIZACJA EDUKACJI**

Introduction

When the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 to measure the skills of 15-year-old students, Finland ranked first among 32 participating countries. Between 2000 and 2009, Finnish students consistently achieved top scores in mathematics, reading comprehension, and natural sciences, attracting widespread attention from researchers and policymakers worldwide. This interest came even from countries with high educational expenditures but less spectacular outcomes (Czujko-Moszyk, 2018).

Although Finland's international rankings have since declined, the most recent PISA results, which included 81 countries, show that Finnish students continue to perform well above the global average, with many achieving top-tier scores (OECD, 2023). Several factors contributed to Finland's educational success, particularly the comprehensive reforms introduced in the 1970s, which established a compulsory nine-year basic education system (*peruskoulu*), fully state-funded and centrally managed. This system offers universal access to education and integrates career and personal counseling. While the national curriculum offers a broad framework, local authorities are responsible for managing and financing schools, allowing for regional adaptation (Czujko-Moszyk, 2018).

The foundation of Finland's education system is enshrined in the country's constitution, which guarantees the absolute right to education for all. Finnish education is guided by core principles such as equality, individualized lifelong learning, and cooperation, which is the leading philosophy of the Finnish system. Since the early 1990s, Finland's primary education system has embraced the philosophy of inclusion, built on principles of accessibility and universal design (Kyrö-Ämmälä et al., 2017). According to research by Aino Laari et al. (2021) Finnish teachers recognize the value of diversity and are committed to providing all their students with equal opportunities to learn and succeed. In inclusive education, teachers are key to addressing students' individual needs and fostering a sense of belonging within the school community. Inclusion is not only supported by legal mandates and policies but also deeply embedded in the educational culture (Kyrö-Ämmälä et al., 2017).

Teacher education therefore plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality of the Finnish education system. In Finland, all teachers are required to have a Master's degree, and teacher training programs emphasize research-based education, where teaching is both informed by and integrated with research (Toom et al., 2010). This research-based approach has been identified as a key factor contributing to the high quality of teaching and Finland's strong performance in international assessments like PISA (Niemi et al., 2012).

According to Ashok Federick (2020), several key factors shape Finland's current educational system:

- Philosophy and state policy, rooted in the principles of the welfare state and pragmatism. The government places a strong emphasis on education, prioritizing it as a cornerstone for the development of the country.

- Excellent teacher preparation and high social status of teachers, who play an active role in designing curricula. This reflects the high value Finnish that society places on education. Teachers work 19–24 hours per week and spend 3 hours per week on self-development and collaboration with colleagues and other professionals. They also work closely with their students' parents.
- An education process based on early intervention and diagnosis of learning difficulties, without resorting to standardized tests. Teachers provide individualized support and help to each student during extracurricular activities, protecting students against stigmatization.
- Assessment of students' learning progress that does not rely on external or standardized tests. Instead, teachers use their own assessments to gauge learning progress. Grades are not viewed as indicators of the quality of education.
- The common motto is "test less, teach more." The system recognizes that each student is unique, and has different capabilities. As such, success is measured not by grades, but by the ability to offer guidance and support to struggling students and to create a friendly and inclusive learning environment. This individualized approach is reflected in the adaptation of books, assignments, exercises, and the time allotted for each task to meet students' varying needs.
- Building a sense of community in the learning process is also essential. This sense of belonging is reinforced by teachers, students, and the entire school community as part of the system responsible for the education process. The foundation of this community is the equality of all participants – students, teachers, parents, adults, and children – along with the equitable funding of schools. As a result, the quality of education is consistent across all Finnish schools.

Regardless of the OECD rankings, which mainly offer insight into how Finnish education compares to other systems, the Finnish model seems to stand out as particularly relevant in the ongoing transformation of schools toward inclusive education characterized by accessibility, sustainable educational goals, a flexible support system, and a unified curriculum (Szumski, 2019).

Data from the *Statistical Report on Inclusive Education in Poland* (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2021) reveal inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient financial support for infrastructure adaptation, a lack of appropriate teaching materials, and a shortage of specialists. It also highlights unmet accessibility standards, negative societal attitudes toward students with special needs, and the absence of coherent policies and strategies for implementing necessary changes.

Authors who analyze inclusive education in Poland highlight the complexity of the issue and the many factors influencing the current state of education. These factors include the disconnect between declared ideals of inclusion and real-world practices, low societal readiness for inclusion, and the persistence of exclusionary narratives about the "Other," who is seen as needing support (Krause, 2023). Other challenges include the low professional prestige and stability of teaching, excessive teacher workloads (Chrzanowska, 2019), and a tendency among teachers to adopt isolating attitudes (Kołodziejczyk,

2020; Skibska, 2021). Many teachers are accustomed to traditional teacher-centered methods, are hesitant to embrace change (Baran et al., 2021) and often lean toward an authoritarian teaching style (Kanar, 2023).

Another critical area requiring both academic reflection and practical solutions is also the culture of the school. As a dynamic structure encompassing both material and symbolic elements, and influencing every aspect of a school's functioning (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020), school culture is of particular importance for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Zamkowska, 2017; Chrzanowska, 2021).

Methodological Assumptions and Research Results

The research presented in this article aimed to gather teachers' opinions on the Finnish education model and assess the potential for implementing its principles within the Polish system, particularly in the context of inclusive education. The study focused on the following key questions:

- How important are the factors characterizing the Finnish education system for the quality of inclusive education?
- Which aspects of the Finnish system are already present in the Polish education system?
- What Finnish system elements should be introduced into the Polish education system?

A total of 258 respondents participated in the study, the majority of whom were women (83.33%). Of these, 38.76% worked in rural areas, while the remainder were based in towns of various sizes. The average age of respondents was 37.96 years (ranging from 23 to 63), and their average professional experience was 12.8 years (ranging from 1 to 39 years). Certified teachers made up 34.50% of the sample, while 28.68% were contract teachers. Most respondents were teachers of grades I–III, with 59.30% having experience working with students with special educational needs (SEN).

The study employed a quantitative research approach using a diagnostic survey. The survey contained 11 statements, which respondents rated on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The statements were grouped into three categories:

- A) The importance of Finnish system factors for the quality of education;
- B) The presence of these factors in Polish education;
- C) The necessary changes in Polish education to align more closely with the Finnish system.

Each statement was accompanied by a brief explanation of the relevant Finnish education factors. The analysis of the collected research material revealed that, of the 11 factors characterizing the Finnish education model, respondents identified the following as the most important for its success:

- Excellent working conditions resulting from a sense of understanding, security, acceptance, and community.

- A positive public image of schools and high levels of social trust in teachers.
- Teaching methods focused on the individual developmental path of each student, emphasizing active learning, creativity, and critical thinking rather than rote memorization.
- Supportive psychosocial learning conditions (see Table 1).

The respondents placed the least importance on “school atmosphere” and “the methods for evaluating and assessing the work of students and schools” (Table 1). Factors such as age, gender, work experience, professional title, and experience with SEN students were found to influence opinions on the importance of individual factors. Significant differences between men and women (p -values < 0.05) emerged, with women assigning higher importance to aspects such as preparation and ethos of the teaching profession, evaluation methods, factors defining school as a workplace, and students’ homework. Older and more experienced respondents, on the other hand, rated the importance of students’ homework lower.

Further analysis revealed that trainee and contract teachers rated the importance of “school atmosphere” higher than certified teachers, who placed more emphasis on “financing” than their appointed and contract counterparts. Teachers with SEN experience rated the significance of assessment methods higher than those without such experience.

The factors that were identified as the best-functioning in Poland, and characteristic of the Finnish system, included psychosocial learning conditions, the inclusion of SEN students in mainstream education, and financing. In contrast, the lowest-rated factors were methods of evaluation and assessment, preparation and ethos of the teaching profession, and students’ homework. Among the elements considered representative of the Finnish model, participants deemed the following to be the most effectively functioning in Poland:

- “psychosocial learning conditions”;
- “inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education”;
- “financing”;
- The lowest-rated factors were:
 - “methods of evaluating and assessing the work of students and schools”;
 - “preparation and ethos of the teaching profession” and
 - “students’ homework.”

However, the average ratings of these factors were significantly lower than the importance attributed to them for the success of the Finnish model (Table 1).

Opinions varied based on seniority, workplace, and professional title. Work experience and professional title were negatively correlated with the assessment of the “financing” factor in Poland ($p < 0.05$); the longer the experience, the lower the rating. Trainee and contract teachers rated this factor higher than certified teachers. Teachers in rural areas gave significantly higher ratings to “preparation and ethos of the teaching profession,” “teaching methods,” and “psychosocial learning conditions” compared to those in other areas. They also rated the following factors higher:

- “positive image of schools, social trust in teachers” compared to those in large cities,
- “school atmosphere” compared to those in the largest cities,
- “method of evaluating work” and “including SEN students in mainstream education” compared to teachers in small and large cities.

Participants ranked “school as a place of work” and “positive image of schools and social trust in teachers” as the top factors for improving the Polish education system, mirroring their highest ratings in the Finnish system. “Preparation and ethos of the teaching profession” was the third most important factor. Women rated the need for changes in these areas higher than men, and teachers of grades I–III felt more strongly about changes related to “preparation and ethos of the teaching profession” and “school as a place of work” compared to those teaching at higher education levels. Older respondents and those with more experience were more likely to advocate for changes in “including students with SEN in mainstream education” and “financing.” Certified teachers were also more convinced of the need for changes in financing, which aligns with their ratings of Finnish system factors in Poland.

The summary of average ratings for the studied areas reveals that the perceived importance of the factors defining the Finnish model, as well as the need for changes in these areas, were significantly higher than the ratings assigned to the current functioning of these factors in the Polish system (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Ratings for Factors Characterizing the Finnish Model

Factor	\bar{x}		
	a	b	c
Preparation and ethos of the teaching profession	4.4	2.18	4.3
Positive image of schools, social trust in teachers	4.59	2.24	4.31
Teaching methods	4.57	2.31	4.23
Atmosphere at school	3.52	2.29	3.29
Method of evaluating the work of students and schools	4	1.94	3.88
Including students with SEN in mainstream education	4.35	2.44	3.92
Psychosocial learning conditions	4.51	2.78	3.83
School as a place of work	4.69	2.37	4.33
Students' homework	4.34	2.2	4.06
Focusing on students' well-being and developing their strengths	4.33	2.33	4.16
Financing	4.39	2.42	4.16

Notes:

- Assessment of factors characterizing the Finnish model
- Assessment of the functioning of these factors in the Polish system
- The need for changes in the Polish system related to these factors from the Finnish model

Discussion

The process of building democratic societies that value diversity begins with education (UNESCO, 2020). This process is shaped by the legislative framework and the solutions it offers, as well as the involvement of all participants. The role of a modern teacher should not be limited to implementing curriculum content and organizing the educational process but should also involve reflectively shaping the educational experience (Szumski, 2019). The Finnish model exemplifies a system where the teacher's role is not only essential but emphasized as a key factor in driving change and enhancing educational effectiveness, which is one of the fundamental conditions for the country's development (Federick, 2020).

This study confirms that professional training, including opportunities for professional development, the prestige of the profession, and the positive image of schools, are the most important factors for the surveyed teachers in terms of educational effectiveness. At the same time, these are areas in need of reform in Poland. Social perceptions of the profession, its value, and the trust placed not only in teachers but also in schools as institutions, play a vital role in engagement and serve as significant motivators for work (Krause, 2023). Only a teacher acting as an expert, rather than merely an observer or executor of directives, can become a co-responsible participant in the educational process. Teacher effectiveness is increasingly viewed through the lens of social interactions within the school environment (Zamkowska, 2017; Chrzanowska, 2021).

For the respondents, working conditions defined by a sense of community, acceptance, and safety were deemed more important than changes related to funding. They also rated the importance and functioning of "psychosocial learning conditions" highly in Poland, recognizing the value of nurturing relationships and developing students' interpersonal skills alongside their academic knowledge. In contrast, significantly lower ratings were given to the "school atmosphere" factor, likely reflecting the difference from Finland, where informal relationships between students and teachers, grounded in the belief that partnership fosters internal motivation and enthusiasm for learning, are the norm.

It is also worth noting that the need for change in areas related to the factors "preparation and ethos of the teaching profession" and "school as a place of work" was particularly emphasized by teachers of grades I–III. At this stage, when students with SEN enter the school environment, teachers may be acutely aware of their lack of adequate preparation for working in diverse teams, the need for professional development, and the importance of a safe and supportive community. It is likely significant that competence tests for third graders, as well as diagnostic assessments carried out at the beginning of fourth grade, are common in Polish schools, although not obligatory. While these assessments aim to gauge students' knowledge and skills, they also function as an indirect measure of the teacher's effectiveness. This burden of social requirements and responsibility for preparing children – one of the greatest professional stressors (Chrzanowska, 2019) – could be a key factor driving the perceived need for change.

A high rating for the factors “preparation and ethos of the profession” and “methods of work” did not, however, correspond with a strong conviction for change in the latter. Even though creative and active learning strategies are valued positively, activating and non-traditional methods may not be viewed as practical for achieving the outcomes specified in the curriculum. Additionally, the Polish education system is heavily tied to standardized tests and preparing students to solve them according to specific answer keys. Surprisingly, the method of evaluating schools and students in Finland also received a low rating. Did the respondents not consider reducing competition in favor of cooperation, eliminating school rankings, and moving away from standardized tests as important for educational effectiveness? Or does the education system tend to preserve the status quo (Kwieciński, 2021)?

Conclusion

The Finnish education system is not only effective but also supportive of the idea of including all students. As such, its solutions can serve as a model for Polish teachers. Researchers have identified several factors in the Finnish system that should be reflected in Polish schools, including the preparation of teachers to work in diverse teams, the positive image of schools, and societal trust in teachers. Additionally, significant changes are needed in working conditions to ensure safety, acceptance, and a sense of community. The importance of these factors in achieving high-quality inclusive education is undeniable. However, as Kwieciński (2021) noted, schools tend to reproduce rather than create cultural and social patterns, adapting to ongoing changes. Thus, what may serve as a model for building inclusive education in Poland, based on the Finnish system, is the society’s awareness and readiness for inclusiveness (Krause, 2023), along with a philosophy and state policy rooted in the belief that education is the foundation of development (Federick, 2020).

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