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## Varied Dimensions of Educational Change – Examples from Finland and Poland

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*Różnorodne wymiary zmiany edukacyjnej – przykłady z Finlandii  
i Polski*

**Abstract:** The article begins with a review of literature on particular reasons for implementing educational change. The subsequent part analyses the causes of educational stability in Finland. The next part of the paper refers to the features characterizing the prestige of Finnish teachers and their professional stability in society. Finally, the third part stipulates the reasons for the instability of Polish educational transformation since 2017. It scrutinises politically-driven educational changes, the sources roots of teachers' lack of prestige and stability in Polish society. The documents concerning the subject of the analyses were studied by means of a problem method, taking into account factors related to time and the influence of society.

**Keywords:** educational change; instability of Polish educational change; teachers' prestige in Poland; educational stability in Finland

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł rozpoczyna się od przeglądu literatury dotyczącej poszczególnych przesłanek wdrażania zmiany edukacyjnej. W pierwszej części dokonano analizy przyczyn stabilności edukacyjnej w Finlandii. Kolejna część odnosi się do cech charakteryzujących prestiż fińskich nauczycieli i ich stabilność zawodową w społeczeństwie. Wreszcie trzecia część określa przyczyny niestabilności polskich przemian edukacyjnych od 2017 roku. W artykule analizie poddane zostały zmiany edukacyjne motywowane politycznie oraz źródła braku prestiżu nauczycieli i stabilności w polskim społeczeństwie. Dokumenty dotyczące przedmiotu analiz zbadano metodą problemową, uwzględniając czynniki związane z czasem oraz wpływem społeczeństwa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zmiana edukacyjna; niestabilność zmiany edukacyjnej w Polsce; prestiż nauczycieli w Polsce; stabilność edukacyjna w Finlandii

## INTRODUCTION: EDUCATIONAL CHANGE AND ITS REASONS

The 1960s can be considered the period when research on changes in education began. The 1970s were marked by a crisis of educational credibility. In the 1980s, large-scale educational changes were introduced in England and the United States. Teachers' competences were clarified. Implementation of educational change requires transparency and clarity. More complex reforms require more time to be explained to the society, teachers, parents and students. There is a danger that teachers will have difficulty in understanding the basics of such reforms. Therefore, the desire, as well as clarity, complexity and quality are basic constituents of educational change.

On the other hand, Fullan (2001) mentions the role of the quality of relationships between teachers, as one of the conditions for the implementation of educational changes. He believes that open communication, full trust and mutual support are all needed in the workplace. He adds that teachers should not only understand, but also implement educational changes, especially at local, district, community and principal levels (Fullan, 2001). Implementation of change may reveal problems at an institutional level, with psychological and pedagogical barriers, related to teachers' misunderstanding of rules and methods. Therefore, emphasis on appropriate school management within educational change, on monitoring procedures as well as on cooperation between is of utmost importance.

Another problem with change in education arises if it is implemented shortly before parliamentary elections, without taking into account cultural and local problems. In this light, too short time for planning results in failure. Sarason (1971) adds that changes are an understandable but unfortunate way of thinking, and Senge et al. emphasise that "the fundamental flaw of most innovators' strategies is that they focus on their innovations, on what they are trying to do, rather than on understanding how the larger culture, structures, standards, and norms will react to their efforts" (Senge et al., 1999, p. 26).

Fullan also writes about the necessary time needed for the implementation of change. If the time is unrealistic, it leads to failure. He stipulates a minimum of two to three years for proper implementation of change in education. "Institutional reforms can take as long as five to ten years. At each level, changes in infrastructure, educational policy, and administration take even more time. Reasons for complete rejection of a comprehensive educational change result from the values contained in it, inadequate sources of support for the change, and insufficient time for its implementation" (Fullan, 1995, p. 106).

The implementation of educational change should be accompanied by teachers' "Fourth Way" professionalism. Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) conclude that teachers need preparation to be able to help expand their involvement in the process of improvement of the quality of their teaching and their pupils' learning. In

some countries, the need for teachers' new professionalism is seen as a destructive attack on their autonomy and the existing expertise, whereas other countries reinforce teachers' autonomy. The former scenario results in teachers stopping to plan and control their own work and hinders their ability to perform tasks well and reflectively. In Poland, one of the problems of education is implementation of reform without a clear vision of changes. We observe educational changes without asking questions: What is the introduced change in education for, what is it, and how does one run it? (Potulicka, 2001, p. 11).

In this article, we focus on Finnish and Polish perspectives on teachers' stability in their workplace. We would like to compare the most vibrant differences in attitude towards creation of educational change within the countries' educational policies, together with their consequences for teachers.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to present educational change with its consequences for teachers, we formulated the following research questions:

- 1) What are the characteristic features of Polish and Finnish educational policies with their consequences for teachers?
- 2) What professional status in the context of teachers' prestige and stability emerges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of the above factors?

The main focus of our study was to analyse educational change, which is applicable to all schools in Finland and Poland.

As mentioned, our analysis began with a review of literature on educational change. The next step was to identify how educational change influenced teachers' work in Finland and Poland. We made use of a problem method to study documents concerning educational change (Wodak, Krzyżanowski, 2008, p. 156). The method has its roots in an educational phenomenon which is placed in time and related to society. From this perspective, different views, regularities and principles are contrasted. Also, we aimed at using primary rather than secondary sources in this article, appearing in different places and at different times.

## EDUCATIONAL STABILITY IN FINLAND

Various ways of conducting educational policy are present in Europe. Nordic countries, like Finland, introduced educational stability embedded into stability of public services. The beginnings were linked to social trust, which was explained by Finnish sociologists (Kangas et al., 2021) who wrote:

If John Lennon and Paul McCartney were sociologists, the title of their most famous and the most cited article could be *All You Need Is Trust*. Really, trust is something we need in everyday life. We can't go into positive and productive interactions with others if we don't trust them, similarly without trust, we cannot have proper interactions with public institutions and authorities. Mutual trust is a prerequisite for the functioning of any social organization. Societies with low levels of generalized trust in fellow citizens and institutions inevitably face political instability and corruption, hence, by reforming social institutions and experimenting with a new solution in social policy, how to increase and maintain social trust, and in Putnam's sense, encourage people to "go bowling together". (p. 131)

In domestic politics, the Finnish state tried to plan and act actively and pragmatically in those areas that were susceptible to the influence of political decisions. Manneuvo (2020, p. 422) states that a very important element of this activity was to rely on scientific, expert diagnoses, i.e. on technocratic and always apolitical and fully rational educational decisions. The start was not easy when the biggest reform in Finnish education began in November 1963. There was a rapid level of migration to urban areas in Finland, new rules were established by the largest social consensus in education prepared by the Agrarian Party. Since the Finnish society wanted good education for all, the new principles were positively received by the society. The Agrarian Party and the left-wing parties prepared the new rules in education, based on effective education for all students. Moreover, Finland "eliminated the system of external inspection and introduced procedures to improve the quality of teachers' work" (Suwalska, 2021b, p. 221).

Moreover, teacher-centred teaching methods previously used in Finnish schools were criticised at that time. As a result, the Finns rethought not only the theory, but also the methodology of teaching in schools. In this way, state authorities explained and justified their decisions regarding educational change (Suwalska, 2021b). Time and money had been invested, experts had been consulted and research had been done before change in education was introduced. Consequently, the reforms were introduced, which are now being supplemented by not politically-driven fine-tuning, no longer affecting the structure of entire education system. The trends emphasise pupils' free participation in education, social benefits, pupils' welfare defended by the Pupil and Student Welfare Act and safe learning environment with balanced and well-prepared free meals on school days (Basic Education Act 628/1998, section 14, as amended by 477/2003, sections 22 and 29, as amended by 1267/2013 and 1498/2016).

Finns do not follow standardisation or test-based accountability and delve into constant teaching-learning process without ongoing control. Also, Finland teaches global values and skills, in "foreign languages, civic awareness and global citizenship" (*Building tomorrow's global citizens*, 2018, p. 24). Promotion of understanding of cultural diversity in the light of the past, the present and the future is emphasised in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014, p. 19).

According to Sahlberg, there is a high level of fairness of educational outcomes in Finland and children have equal development prospects in school (Sahlberg, 2015). In this perspective, being a teacher is perceived among Finnish teachers as a job for life. The current Prime Minister of Finland, Sanna Marin wrote about herself: “My family is full of sad stories, just like many other Finns. I am the first person in my family who finished secondary school and university, all thanks to the Finnish welfare state and encouraging and demanding teachers. (...) My childhood and youth were not rich in material goods, but in love and ordinary everyday life. I grew up in a rainbow family” (Soćko, 2022, p. 1). Equity in the Finnish context means having a socially fair and inclusive education system that gives everyone the opportunity to fulfill their intentions and dreams through education.

#### POLISH INSTABILITY IN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SINCE 2017

The reforms of education in Finland are well thought out and well planned with money secured for their implementation. We perceive Finnish reforms as small reforms which are not politically driven and which do not change the structure of the entire educational system, as was the case during the 2017 Law and Justice reforms in Poland. According to the Supreme Chamber of Control (*Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*, NIK), the changes in the education system were “introduced in less than nine months, were unreliably prepared and implemented” (*Reforma oświaty...*, 2019, p. 1) at the planning stage. The Supreme Chamber of Control also underlined problems related to the process of preparing new core curricula and adapting them to students’ abilities. Revolutions require other “warriors” than reforms, which is limited to a different formulation of the reformed problems, to changing legal acts regulating the reformed issues (Śliwerski, 2015). It resulted in the social distrust of teachers’ job, decreased trust in schools as well as in teachers’ instability. In this light, according to Śliwerski (2023b), the Law and Justice and Civic Platform are not interested in school as an environment of socialization and education that would cultivate universal human values. Political parties in Poland do not want to invest in teachers, which contributes to disregarding or ignoring them. This cheating of teachers reveals the lack of interest of political parties in the field of didactics and upbringing, causing a lack of trust in this profession in Poland.

Revolution within education overthrows the existing order, changes it completely, so as to eliminate it altogether, and in its place creates new social structures, a new state law, a new ideology, in short, a new order corresponding to the

interests of the social classes that carry out the revolution and provide its fighters (Śliwerski, 2015, pp. 39–40).

The governing party in Poland needs education that will please politicians, allow them to divert attention from the real problems of education, and excite people with results that are *de facto* meaningless for practice. The aim of the research needed by politicians is to obtain data that will allow them to deal with everyday reality in order to be able to better control it and achieve benefits for their own political environments.

Based on such principles, the reform of 2017 resulted in the deterioration of teaching conditions in some local schools. Also, secondary school head teachers faced a huge challenge as their classes were doubled. From September 2019, more than 705,000 pupils started their education in secondary schools, which meant additional 370,000 pupils (8<sup>th</sup> grade primary school graduates). The Ministry of Education had incorrectly assessed the financial and organisational effects of the introduced changes, namely it had assumed that the reform would be financed from the educational part of the general subsidy and the budget of local governments. Meanwhile, between 2014 and 2017, the expenditure of local government units responsible for the implementation of educational tasks increased by more than 12%, while the amounts of educational subsidies increased by only 6%. In the same period, the share of the educational subsidy in local government expenditure on educational tasks fell from 63 to 60% (*Reforma oświaty...*, 2019, pp. 1–3).

The Law and Justice authors of the reform assumed that the average cost of education per pupil would fall, while it increased between 2016 and 2018 by 6.4%. According to local governments, the mistakenly created reform with its expenses influenced indirectly teachers' salaries. This situation has lasted until 2023 and constant fall in teachers' salaries in Poland has been observed. There is no motivation for teachers to stay in their profession. The government, together with the Minister of Education, encourage teachers to take extra jobs outside of school.

This scientific consideration demands its extension with Śliwerski's hypothesis: Probably, once again, the above areas of life will be used by politicians only for propaganda purposes, to gain votes of support, but nothing more. We operate in a sphere that is unprofitable for politicians in power, because it is based on opinion polls.

Śliwerski adds that "education, science and culture are a cost for every authority, so there will be no significant changes in the necessary and serious change in the economic status of employees of these spheres of public service" (Śliwerski, 2023, pp. 1–3). Moreover, a blog article reveals sad facts about Polish teachers who will pay their bills, having in 2023, a very limited income, but a high level of social mission. Moreover, teachers will feed their souls with a sense of selfless action for

the common good and wait until the next parliamentary elections in 2027. It is linked to Burda's (2022, p. 1) article.

Other factors which contribute to teachers leaving their posts include under-developed career paths, professional burnout, stress, lack of prestige of the teaching profession and lack of respect in the society, and often also in the internal structures of a given institution (Wesoła, 2022). The educational change presented above, with its consequences for teachers, illustrates methods of achieving political goals by the contemporary Polish government (Śliwerski, 2015), a government which does not need research to find out the truth about education and its determinants. This government, as well as the previous one, need diagnoses to manipulate society, so that under the guise of concern for the value of education, they can achieve their political goals.

## RESULTS – TEACHERS' PRESTIGE WITHIN FINNISH SOCIETY

There is no equality without quality, there is no quality without trust that is part of Finland's educational miracle (Woźniak, 2023). Its other important feature is that nobody is interested in school rankings. There is a conviction about their harmfulness of their narrowly understood effectiveness in education. It does not mean that there is no competition in Finland. This is related to access to the teaching profession, which is highly competitive, with emphasis on teachers' institutional empowerment, which is another component of Finland's educational success. In the Finnish society, the teaching profession is as prestigious as that of solicitor or medical doctor (Sahlberg, 2015). In Finland, the slightest statistical impact of the socio-economic status of the student's family of origin has been identified (both in terms of parents' wealth and education), as well as the smallest differences in results between schools.

The system provides deep support for learning, and political leaders are aware that investing in the education system leads to the formation of a strong group of teachers with high competences. They understand that well-prepared teachers are key to pupils' academic success. The quality of teachers' work and their preparation for the profession has been recognised as one of the key factors. In Finland's two-stage recruitment model, high scores in the first stage allow future teachers to move on to the second stage. They have to prepare a scientific essay in pedagogy based on at least 10 items from professional literature, are obliged to present their interpersonal skills, as well as test their abilities in sports and arts (Sahlberg, 2015, pp. 102–106). Teacher education in Finland is a key element not only in preparing staff for the profession, but also in teachers' further development in their workplace. To achieve this goal, the country has developed a strong system of teacher

training. Universities have full autonomy in selecting teacher training programmes (Sahlberg, 2015, pp. 107–110).

Finland's educational success is largely attributed to efforts focused on recruiting, preparing, developing and maintaining a strong teaching staff within the purposeful system of building human capital (Niemi, 2011). Its teacher education (Simola, 2005; Suwalska, 2022) programme is based on theoretical knowledge, practical training and research. If teachers want to improve their skills, their head teachers pay for them (short courses or multi-day training). Postgraduate studies for teachers are not common in Finland. "Individual development dialogues" are popular. They discuss teachers' professional development and influence the level of their high effectiveness. Their professional status becomes that of independent teachers who possess autonomy, are able to create their own curricula, are obliged to be research-based teachers (Niemi, 2008), and as such, are able to fulfill their dreams through education. In a Finnish school, "values such as equality in access to education, cooperation and trust between teachers and teachers towards students are perceived as the pillars of learning in primary education" (Suwalska, 2021a, p. 222). These values, inscribed in the concept of learning, help students to improve their ability to learn on an ongoing basis and contribute to lifelong learning, turning education into a lifestyle.

Well-educated and respected teachers constitute Finland's intellectual elite. Therefore, there is no need to control their work, so the system does not need continuous inspections and education boards. There is no need to invest public money into school rankings and reports. Versatile cultural competence and appreciation of the Finnish cultural heritage are the main parts of the cultural task of basic education which enable pupils to build their own cultural identity and cultural capital. The role of school is to enable pupils to understand changes in the world which are related to their fair, sustainable development and well-being.

## RESULTS – POLITICALLY-DRIVEN POLICY AND LACK OF TEACHERS' PRESTIGE WITHIN POLISH SOCIETY

The crisis regarding the prestige of Polish teachers is rooted in the policy of recent governments, leading to the decline of this prestige through unnecessary reforms, excessive duties and extremely low salaries. Since 2021 in Poland, there has been propaganda about teachers' laziness. "It seems that teachers have lost the sense of meaning of their profession" (Boczkowska, 2023, p.1). It is often repeated that teachers lack enthusiasm, interest, and pedagogical cre-



ativity, whereas the creativity is being killed by the growing administration. Teachers experience difficulties with the core curriculum, the size of which exceeds the possibilities of its implementation even for the best teacher. The best teachers implement approx. 80% of the curriculum, other teachers less. This forces pupils and their parents to seek knowledge outside of school, i.e. to take private lessons. It is not without reason that the Polish education system is said to be certifying, i.e. issuing certificates of transition to the next grade, whereas the teaching and the acquisition of knowledge takes place outside of school. All these factors contributed to the situation, in which the best teachers leave schools to find employment in other sectors.

Research conducted by the Stefan Batory Foundation from August 2019 confirms that 35% of Polish families with children use paid tutoring (50% in large cities, 26.5% in villages). They spend significant amounts of money on supplementing the deficiencies of the public education system. Parents who send their children to afternoon classes usually do so several times a month (14.35% of respondents), 10.26% of families use tutoring occasionally, and 9.26% several times a week (Malczewski, 2019, p. 2).

The statistics reveal the dark side of the Polish education system in which the poor and less educated can only dream of transferring their children to fee-paying private schools, because tuition fees are generally beyond their reach. Poles do not trust the public education system. Wealthy families with high educational aspirations pay out of their own money for tutoring, whereas poor and less educated people have very limited opportunities to improve their life chances by studying in a state-own school. If the education system fails to change, most children from less educated and worse-off families will never catch up with their peers whose wealthy parents pay for their extra lessons.

On the other hand, half of the schools in Poland lack teachers of physics, mathematics, chemistry and English (NIK, 2021, p. 1). There are bleak prospects for finding people willing to work at every level of education. Young people choose pedagogy studies less and less often (reasons provided in Table 1). This applies in particular to technical universities, where there is a shortage of young people to stay at universities to replace retiring professors. A civil rights advocate, Marcin Wiącek reported the situation to the Minister of Education, writing: “Further downplaying the problem may lead to irreversible damage to the level of education of children and youth. It happens that the search for teachers in the last months may mean a loss of continuity of learning and deficiencies in the implementation of the core curriculum” (Boczkowska, 2023, p. 1).

Table 1. Finnish teachers versus Polish teachers

Finnish teacher	Polish teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– within school curriculum prepared at school</li> <li>pupils' interests are the most important</li> <li>– school is the only one source of pupils' knowledge (no private lessons)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– centralised curriculum is the most important</li> <li>– school is not the only source of pupils' knowledge</li> <li>– private lessons are popular</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers prepare pupils to life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers are like conductors who prepare to exams</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers have all teaching materials at their disposal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers do not have all teaching materials at their disposal</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers and pupils have free meals at school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers and pupils do not have free meals at school</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– new primary school teachers earn EUR 1,783 (How much does a teacher make in Finland?, 2023, p. 1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– new teachers earn EUR 766.30 (2023) (Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, poz. 352, p. 1)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– experienced teachers earn EUR 5,533 (How much..., 2023, p. 1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– experienced teachers earn EUR 968 (Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, poz. 352, p. 1)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers are an intellectual elite in the country, highly respected</li> <li>– no need to control teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– low teachers' status</li> <li>– constant assessment</li> <li>– no trust in teachers</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own study.

## DISCUSSION

Reforming the school system in the top-down strategy in Poland resembles reorganizing an enterprise without taking into account the subjects of change (Śliwerski, 2023b). This is a violation of the constitutional rights of teachers and citizens to participate in educational change with its awareness and acceptance of the consequences for the lives, development and education of students. It is not allowed to rearrange the structure of education without its members, because this leads to disregard for their dignity and the rights of social and mental life. The crisis regarding the prestige of Polish teachers is rooted in the policy of recent governments, leading to the decline of this prestige through unnecessary reforms, excessive duties and extremely low salaries. According to Regulski (2007, p. 7), in Poland “there is no chance to build a civil society so that people start to actively use democracy and through their involvement and participation in the exercise of (self-) government become real partners of power”.

The constant aversion towards teachers' lack of qualifications among Poles only encourages teachers to change their jobs. The field of education (Śliwerski, 2015) is an excellent place to carry out a “bloodless” social revolution right in the heart

of a democratic state, where the leaders of a party striving for power and gaining it are building an excellent opportunity to arouse expectations among the part of the society in need of educating their own children.

On the other hand, everyone who has undergone the process of education agrees that we remember the most good teachers who discovered our talents, showed us developmental opportunities and supported us by paying attention and working on our individual competences. Even in the difficult period of Minister Przemysław Czarnek's policy (Boczkowska, 2023), it is only teachers who through their work on their pupils' individual needs are able to improve this difficult situation. Meanwhile, the teaching profession is experiencing the greatest crisis in years.

Teacher education in Finland is a key element not only in preparing staff for the profession, but also in teachers' further development in their workplace. This country has developed a strong system of teacher training with teachers' full autonomy in selecting teacher training programmes (Sahlberg, 2015, pp. 107–110). Therefore, there is no need to control their work, so the system does not need continuous inspections and education boards. Well-educated, well-paid and respected teachers constitute Finland's intellectual elite.

## CONCLUSIONS

Finland shows us how to build the foundations of education. Finnish education makes us aware of the importance of selecting the best school graduates for the teaching profession and teaching them what is trust within a well-functioning society. The Finnish system provides deep learning support. Political leaders in Finland are aware that investing in the education system leads to the formation of a strong group of teachers with high competences. These teachers are key to pupils' academic success.

On the other hand, education and teachers in Poland are not in the field of interests of the leading political party since 2015. The editors of *Rzeczpospolita* commissioned a survey of Poles' opinions on what, in their opinion, will be the most important topic during the election campaign before the parliamentary elections in 2023 (*Gospodarka i inflacja...*, 2023, p. 1). It is worth noting that education was not mentioned at all among many important issues. Neither is there a mention of science, academic education or culture. Probably, once again, the above areas of life will be used by politicians only for propaganda purposes, to gain votes of support, but nothing more. We operate in a sphere that is unprofitable for politicians in power, because it is based on opinion polls.

As a result of analyses, we observe two opposite dimensions of educational change: Finnish with high prestige and stability of teachers' posts and Polish with low prestige and growing instability. It is not surprising that teachers have lost

the sense of meaning of their profession, which results in decreased enthusiasm, interest, and pedagogical innovation. This is aggravated by the decrease in salaries and excessive duties.

The effects of Finnish and Polish educational policy manifest themselves in the state of their education and in the level of teachers' well-being. In Poland, dissatisfied pupils, parents, and teachers draw attention to the growing phenomenon of school failure and ineffectiveness. A public discussion on education and paths of educational change in Poland is greatly needed, which would contribute to increase in the stability of the teaching profession as well as to higher levels of teachers' prestige. It is "not without reason that in Finland (...) teachers are considered to be the core of the system of quality and educational effectiveness" (Nowosad, Suwalska, 2023, p. 288), which shows that strengthening the identity and pride of teachers contributes to better teaching skills and greater respect in society.

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