

Inequalities in the Polish educational system. Anomie between school principals, practice and policy expectations

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ABSTRACT

Educational inequalities have become one of the most urgent challenges in contemporary education in Poland. School leaders are pivotal in addressing these disparities, yet they often face structural and socio-economic barriers that hinder the implementation of inclusive policies. Drawing on Durkheim and Merton's theory, the research identifies two dimensions of anomie: organisational infeasibility and leadership disintegration. Using qualitative methods, including focus groups and individual interviews with educational leaders, the study reveals a disconnect between policy expectations and practical realities. Research results indicate that anomie encompasses two dimensions: a breakdown in organisational feasibility and a breakdown in educational leadership.

KEYWORDS

Anomie; school leadership; educational policy; inequalities; qualitative research

Introduction

Inequalities have emerged as one of the most pressing contemporary challenges in education (Aiston and Walraven 2024; Çecelele 2020). These were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are rooted in historical global disparities. Inequalities result from a variety of factors, including socio-economic and sociocultural background, gender, spatial segregation and access to resources (Bartak 2019; Langthaler and Malik 2023). Creating educational policies that ensure equality is essential because it provides students with the cultural and civic competencies necessary to critically analyse reality and make informed decisions (Bandola 2020; Smith and Gümüő 2022).

Despite efforts to improve education systems, educational inequalities are becoming increasingly diverse and difficult to resolve. In Poland, this problem is highlighted by growing disparities in student achievement and public

school funding and constantly shifting changes in educational policy. What is more, since 2015, the education system has been promoting elitism and encouraging the development of non-public and private schools (Mendel 2022).

We know that growing inequalities limit social mobility, worsen access to services and hamper social development (OECD 2024). Scientific findings from many fields, such as sociology, psychology, economics and public health, indicate that various forms of social inequality have a significant impact on the health and well-being of individuals (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2024).

School leaders play a key role in shaping policies and practices that can mitigate or exacerbate inequality (Liu 2025). They face challenges due to socio-economic and structural differences, and policies aimed at inclusion often face implementation problems at the school level. For example, inclusive policies can inadvertently lead to exclusionary practices if not properly managed (Çeçelek 2024).

Educational leaders encounter barriers that prevent them from acting in the field of educational policy. Our research identifies anomie among policy expectations and school leaders' narratives, referring to the inconsistency within the axionormative system that leads to uncertainty and aimlessness in society. In this article, anomie is understood in terms of the impact of social structure on individuals, following the concepts of Durkheim (1951) and Merton (1968). The expectations of public policies are not always feasible due to various constraints and barriers. This leads to different types of behaviour that can significantly impact school leadership and the educational system, especially during times of change.

Inequalities among students

The first level of inequality was defined as educational inequalities among students. The review identified several categories of educational inequality. The low socio-economic status (SES) of parents remains the primary factor contributing to the deepening of educational disparities in schools. Students from lower SES families have limited access to educational resources and support (Bartak 2019; Bandoła 2020; Çeçelek 2020; Długosz 2022; Dolata and Smulczyk 2022; Duda 2023). The impact of SES is also evident in exam results – children from lower SES backgrounds achieve lower scores and experience less educational success (Dolata and Smulczyk 2022; Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024). Another factor exacerbating educational inequality in Poland is low participation in early childhood education. Children from disadvantaged families are less likely to attend pre-school (Bartak 2019). Some authors point to the phenomenon of hidden school selection, where students attend schools with the same official status and qualifications, but the quality of these schools varies significantly (Bandoła 2020; Długosz 2022). Polish schools are highly diverse, especially between small towns and cities, which affects student outcomes in favour of urban pupils (Bartak 2019). Educational outcomes vary by region and social group (Długosz 2022). Cultural exclusion can also be a

factor. Children from upper classes are inheritors of cultural capital aligned with school expectations from an early age. Their culture is considered legitimate and becomes the model promoted by schools, often at the expense of children from lower classes (Duda 2023). Researchers in Poland also highlight four new forms of inequality. The first is digital exclusion – the lack of internet access and equipment deepens school inequalities (Bandoła 2020; Długosz 2022; Osękowska 2021). The second concerns special educational and health needs. Children with chronic illnesses require support that is not always provided in schools (Osękowska 2021). The third involves inequalities experienced by migrant students, including language barriers and lack of individual support. Limited Polish language proficiency significantly hinders learning and leads to poorer outcomes. Migrant students' needs are often undiagnosed, resulting in a lack of appropriate support. The fourth form is excessive parental workload, which limits their ability to support their children's education, potentially deepening inequalities from an early age (Bandoła 2020).

Organisational inequalities

The second level of inequality includes disparities in classroom equipment, funding, and staffing. Polish research highlights inequalities in school funding and resource allocation. Schools in wealthier regions have better facilities, equipment, and staff (Bartak 2019, Cęcelek 2021, Dolata and Smulczyk 2022, Duda 2023, Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024; Marek-Banach and Rola 2024; Osękowska 2021). Budget constraints mean that schools with fewer resources struggle to offer extracurricular activities and support (Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024; Osękowska 2021). Researchers also point to the uneven distribution of resources. Rural schools and those in smaller towns have less access to modern technology and qualified staff (Duda 2023, Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024; Bandoła 2020). Equipment and infrastructure shortages became especially apparent during the pandemic, when schools had to switch to remote learning. Many were unprepared, lacking both equipment and teacher training, which reduced the quality of education (Długosz 2022). What is more, teachers often fail to recognise mechanisms that reproduce inequality (Duda 2023). A lack of training leads to insufficient cultural awareness, which is essential for working effectively with students with special educational needs (Marek-Banach and Rola 2024; Osękowska 2021).

Another organisational factor is the outdated system of educational selection. In Poland, students are assigned to educational tracks based on grades, which can deepen inequalities (Bartak 2019; Bandoła 2020). Organisational inequalities are particularly evident in support for students with special educational needs. There is a shortage of educational materials and qualified staff to teach children with chronic illnesses (Marek-Banach and Rola 2024). Many schools also lack staff and tools to support migrant students for whom Polish is a foreign language (Stankiewicz and Żurek 2022).

Inequalities in policymaking

The third level consists of inequality in educational policymaking. Although this type has been the least discussed by other researchers, it is worth mentioning. Some authors argue that only privileged groups influence educational policy. People from higher social classes are more engaged in decision-making processes. Parents with higher SES are more likely to participate in school decision-making (Dolata and Smulczyk 2022). Due to their proximity to decision-making centres, people from cities and privileged backgrounds have more influence over educational policy (Długosz 2022, Duda 2023, Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024, Marek-Banach and Rola 2024; Osękowska 2021). What is more, disadvantaged groups are either not involved or only marginally involved in educational decision-making. The voices of students and families from lower SES backgrounds are often overlooked (Bartak 2019, Długosz 2022, Duda 2023, Kaźmierczak and Bulkowski 2024; Marek-Banach and Rola 2024; Osękowska 2021; Stankiewicz and Żurek 2022). Additionally, parents of children with disabilities have limited influence on educational policy (Marek-Banach and Rola 2024; Osękowska 2021). Foreign communities are marginalised in decision-making processes (Stankiewicz and Żurek 2022).

Recent research highlights that educational inequalities in Poland persist at three key levels: among students, within school organisations, and in educational policymaking. Socio-economic status remains the strongest predictor of student outcomes, with children from less advantaged families facing barriers to resources, early education, and cultural capital, as well as new challenges such as digital exclusion and insufficient support for special needs and migrant students.

The role of school leaders in redressing inequalities

Studies show that principals are responsible for creating an environment conducive to learning for all students and teachers (Darling-Hammond et al. 2022). They should ensure that the school is a place where students feel comfortable and safe and have the support of adults they can trust (Porter et al. 2024). Educational leadership has a particular role in adapting schools to meet the changing needs of students and the demands of operating in a complex world (Hallinger and Kovačević 2021; Leithwood 2021). Moreover, studies point to the significant contribution of leadership to improving equity in schools. Best practice includes creating authentic partnerships between schools, families and communities to ensure student success. These partnerships can improve conditions at home and raise parental expectations, as well as engage reluctant parents in school decisions. In this context, leaders focus on the needs of the family in the interest of supporting the child (Leithwood 2021). Especially, in times of crises of various kinds, schools need leaders to organise immediate

support from the authorities. School leaders play a key role in mitigating crises, supporting the needs of the school community and leading recovery and normalisation efforts (Culha, Bellibaş, and Özkul 2025). Furthermore, educational leaders can influence equity practices in schools, but often face barriers such as deeply entrenched social and organisational practices (Gümüş, Arar, and Oplatka 2021). As additionally indicated, educational leadership in an era of crisis and inequality must be highly contextual, actively pursuing equality and social justice through partnerships, leveraging student resources, relevant teaching and supporting inclusion (Hallinger and Kovačević 2021). Most research on culturally sensitive leadership focuses on school principals' perceptions of policies, regulations, and forms of support in managing multicultural schools (Brown et al. 2022). Culturally responsive and community-empowering leadership models are essential for advancing both multicultural education and effective educational leadership (Johnson 2014).

Anomie between educational policy and educational leadership

In the difficult times of social changes in Poland, we can observe that the functions of social control and social bonds are collapsing. This causes confusion among individuals as to the applicable norms of behaviour and leads to a certain instability. Durkheim's concept of anomie describes a condition of social disintegration that emerges during periods of profound structural change (Durkheim 1951, 1964, 1982). Merton elaborated on this concept by pointing out the conflict between culturally determined goals and the availability of resources to achieve them (Merton 1968). Moreover, Bielicki points out that anomie can result from the disorganisation of social institutions, the weakening of normative control and the lack of coherence of organisational goals (Bielicki 1993).

In the context of education, anomie can manifest itself in a disconnect between educational policy and school realities, leading to disorientation of educational leaders and difficulties in achieving inclusion goals. Within the educational context, anomie can be observed in the weakening of social trust, the blurring of norms and the lack of coherence between educational policy and school practice. The author points out that anomie intensifies during periods of social transformation, when old norms lose their meaning and new ones are not yet established. Under such conditions, educational leaders operate in a state of uncertainty and lack of clear guidelines, which leads to confusion and alienation (Kozlova 2013).

In education, this may mean building relationships based on dialogue, collaboration and reflexivity. Only in this way is it possible to create healthy social bonds and effective educational leadership that not only implements policy but also responds to the real needs of the school community (Kozlova 2013).

Anomie is portrayed as a permanent feature of contemporary social reality, resulting from the dynamic changes in civilisation, globalisation, neoliberalism

and the culture of consumer capitalism (Coleman 2014). In the context of educational policy and school leadership, anomie can manifest itself in a blurring of norms, a lack of clear rules and difficulties in enforcing responsibility and discipline. As a result, the school loses its ability to shape coherent civic and social attitudes. Educational leaders, operating in an environment of normative chaos, face difficulties in implementing educational policies that are aligned with social reality. Wrzesień emphasises that anomie is not just a lack of norms, but a state in which norms lose their regulatory power, leading to confusion and weakened social cohesion (Wrzesień 2017).

Research design

This study explored the ways in which educational inequalities and the anomie between education policy and schools impact school leaders. The key aim was to research the relationship between educational inequalities, leadership practices, and policy implementation. Accordingly, two research questions guided our inquiry: (1) What educational inequalities do principals and educational experts identify? (2) Does education policy support principals in addressing these inequalities?

The research employs qualitative methods (Babbie 2009; Creswell 2013; Denzin et al. 2024; Lichtman 2023).

Data were gathered in two steps:

1. Focus Group Interviews – Six moderated online group discussions were held with 26 school and educational institutions. The research sample included headteachers and deputy headteachers in public and non-public educational institutions with varying lengths of service (from one year to 18 years). The respondents represented various types of institutions within the Polish education system. The largest group were primary schools, followed kindergartens and special education institutions, as well as secondary schools located in large cities (Krakow, Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Lublin) and smaller towns and rural municipalities (e.g. Jabłonna, Pietrzykowice, Łodygowice, Świnna).
2. Individual Expert Interviews – The study involved nine representatives of non-governmental organisations, government and local government officials, public education support institutions, as well as independent experts involved in education in Poland.

All interviews were conducted online (Microsoft Teams), enabling geographical inclusivity. Participants were selected via purposive and snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) to ensure diverse perspectives.

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Management and Social Communication (registered no. 30 2024).

Ethical processes were considered by ensuring voluntary participation of respondents and obtaining their consent. Anonymity and confidentiality of data were ensured by anonymising statements and restricting access to research material. The research design minimised potential risks to participants by allowing them to refuse to answer or withdraw at any stage. The study was conducted in a transparent and reliable manner, considering the researcher's reflectiveness and in accordance with applicable standards of social research ethics and personal data protection.

A qualitative thematic analysis (Peel 2020; Xu and Zammit 2020) was conducted over two stages:

Stage 1: Interview transcripts were anonymised and coded using MAXQDA. Both deductive and inductive coding were used to explore the research topics broadly and deeply (Bingham 2023) with the code tree refined until saturation (Appendix 1). The process combined codes derived from the research questions with emerging themes, allowing for nuanced interpretation and identification of contradictions, tensions, and agency in participant narratives.

Stage 2: Findings from IDI and FGI interviews were systematically compared to highlight inconsistencies between policy aims and practical realities.

This integrated analytical approach enabled robust classification of thematic categories and illuminated the prevailing relationships between educational inequalities, policy frameworks, and leadership practices. Figure 1 illustrates process of mapping deductive codes (marked in blue) and inductively generated codes (marked in black) and identifying themes (Figure 1).

Findings

Research findings are presented in alignment with the research questions. First, the inequalities recognised by school principals and education experts are discussed. Afterwards, an assessment is conducted of whether education policy supports school principals in addressing these inequalities.*

Educational inequalities, identified by principals and educational experts

The findings from FGI and IDI reveal educational inequalities that relate to unequal access to resources, inequalities in the areas of teacher and student competence, difficulties associated with individualisation of work, and refugees and migrants in the education system. Respondents also point to educational inequalities at the school level, within the education system, and at the macrostructural level. Inequalities at the macrostructural level mean that we are experiencing increasingly deep educational inequalities globally. The issue of leadership also arises in

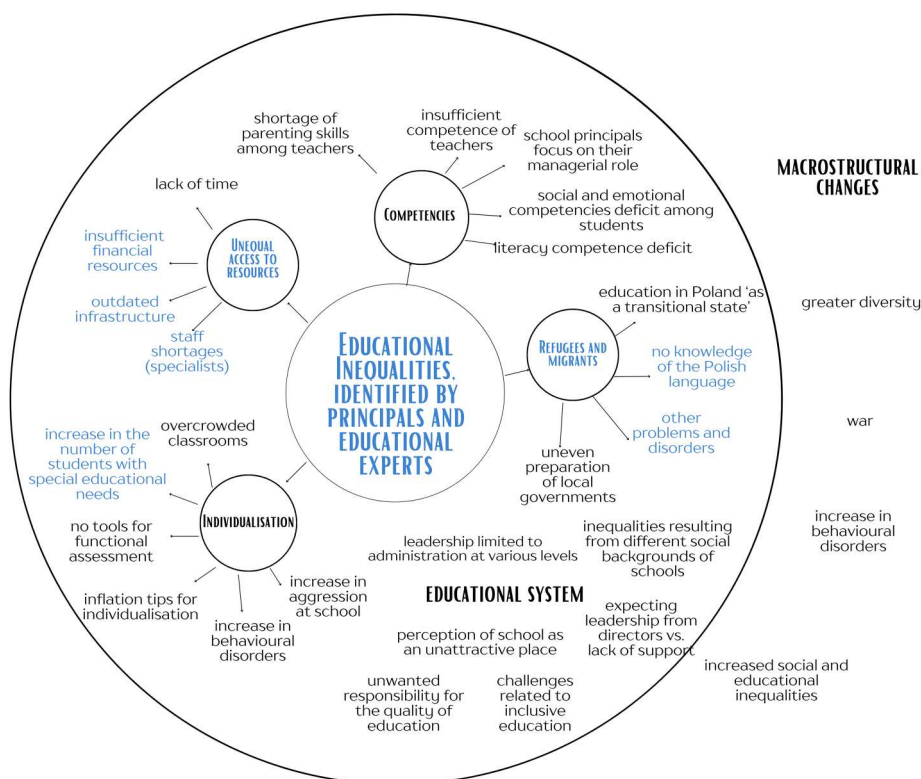


Figure 1. Educational inequalities – map of codes. Source: own work.

the context of responsibility for the quality of education and the reproductive role of school principals in this process. Thus, the educational inequalities identified by the respondents were systematised and presented on three levels. The first level concerns educational inequalities directly experienced by internal school stakeholders. The second dimension is the level of the system and the school as an organisation functioning in a social environment. The third, broadest dimension concerns macrostructural changes – processes that characterise contemporary societies and relate to contemporary challenges. The three levels are presented in the map of educational inequality codes (Figure 1).

Level one: educational inequalities experienced by school internal stakeholders

As we can notice in Figure 1, there are four extended areas that consist of: unequal access to resources, individualisation that is required and unfeasible, competencies – where we try to build a graduate profile without equipping teachers with competencies and refugees and migrants in the Polish education system. For the purposes of this paper, we will share findings about unequal access to resources and refugees and migrants.

Unequal access to resources

School principals (IDI) and education experts (FGI) point to inequalities in access to resources in several areas: financial, material, human resources and time. At the financial level, this primarily concerns insufficient funding for education, which directly translates into educational inequalities. Wealthier local governments can allocate more funds to education than municipalities with smaller budgets:

financially, the increase in spending on education is not adequate to cover the costs incurred by local governments. As a result, we subsidise more than 50% (...) of the education subsidy (...) There is no doubt that no city can meet its educational needs from the central budget. (IDI2)

This also results in low teachers' salaries and the widespread use of additional, paid lessons (tutoring) outside school by students to prepare for exams: '90% of students, especially when it comes to extended subjects, have additional tutoring. And that is a completely different issue, a different pathology' (IDI2). This results in greater access to tutoring in large cities and greater access for students from families with good and very good financial situations.

The material dimension concerns outdated equipment and digital inequalities. Access to modern equipment varies greatly; there are institutions where it is very modern, but there are also those where the equipment is several or even more than a dozen years old. School principals argue that they must 'have technologically modern equipment. Students should learn at school about what is the future in technological development. To show students the way forward, we must keep up, but this requires funding' (FGI1). This means that 'education becomes an education of unequal speeds (...), giving some students wings, while for others it is really poor' (IDI8). Respondents also point to buildings and infrastructure that require renovation and adaptation, giving examples of schools whose buildings need renovation and adaptation to the needs of people with disabilities so that inclusive education can be implemented. There are also cases of schools that have not been renovated for many years. All this means that the school is not perceived as

an attractive place, and the challenge here will be how to reform the school and make it a place that is attractive to children and young people, a place they will want to come to out of their own motivation and not out of so-called compulsion or compulsory schooling. (FGI4)

Limited human resources mean too few specialists in schools. Respondents report that there are not enough psychologists in schools to deal with the current scale of aggression, behavioural disorders and other problems faced by students at school:

If we have two or even five psychologists in a school with 1,000 students, that is not enough. And even if there are 10 of them, but the students do not trust these school psychologists, then that does not solve the problem either. (IDI 4)

There is a shortage of specialists working with students with behavioural disorders. School principals say that they cannot cope with such situations and need the support of specialists and funding for training:

We simply couldn't cope with it. Fortunately, one mother had contact with a therapist who came from Gdańsk for a lot of money. The local government agreed to pay for this training for the Teachers' Council, and we managed to train them somehow. We are managing somehow. (FGI1)

The final issue of educational inequality in terms of resources is time, or rather the lack of time available to teachers. According to school principals, teachers do not have enough time to get sufficiently involved in the development of their institutions because they work part-time at several schools. Highly qualified people, especially in STEM subjects, do not want to work in education because of low salaries –

we are fighting to ensure that education is of a high standard, for example by trying to raise teachers' salaries, but (...) many teachers work in two or three places in three different jobs and do not have time to devote themselves fully to the development of this particular institution. (FGI1)

Refugees and migrants in the Polish education system – it's both good and bad

Respondents point out that Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Poland's neighbour, has completely changed the face of Polish schools. Overnight, schools had to face challenges such as cultural, linguistic and educational differences, but also the overwhelming emotions of fear, helplessness and anger felt by Ukrainian children and their families who had sought refuge in Poland, fleeing the war. The picture that emerges from the narratives of school principals and education experts is one that is, on the one hand, full of good examples and optimism, but on the other hand, also full of problems and different attitudes towards refugees.

The headteachers claim that attitudes towards education vary depending on the students' attitudes. Students who treat school attendance as a 'transitional state (...) unfortunately do not see any need to attend Polish language classes as a foreign language in their current learning process. They do everything superficially' (FGI1). At the same time, students from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine can learn Polish as a second language. The group interview also touched on the issue of discrimination against refugee children, whom headteachers do not want in their schools. A foundation is helping these families, which 'fights with these families to ensure that these children are in this school' (FGI1). There are also voices of education experts who claim that 'teachers in schools are unable to cope with the challenge of children with migration experience' (IDI 9).

The educational inequalities identified in relation to refugee pupils are primarily a lack of knowledge of the Polish language and other problems which, combined with communication difficulties, constitute a huge barrier to children's learning and development. School principals point out the problem that children without language skills must follow the core curriculum, which is much more difficult for them. Even though they receive help,

it will take some time before they learn the language, right? It's not like someone gets 6 or 5 hours of Polish as a foreign language and suddenly speaks Polish fluently in a week. The student must attend geography, chemistry, physics and so on as normal. They must understand what is going on in these lessons. (FGI1)

School principals point out that children from Ukraine also have 'disorders, threats, social maladjustment and, for example, autism spectrum disorders' (FGI1). The language barrier is the main problem, but it is also important 'in what context they came here' (IDI2), and this is the context of war and various difficult situations related to it.

In response to the problems faced by refugee children, who have appeared in large numbers in the Polish education system since 1 September 2024, a new position of intercultural assistant has been introduced. Until then, such people were employed as teaching assistants.

These regulations were quite old and reduced the assistant to the role of a language interpreter, and only for a limited period of 12 months, and precisely as a teaching assistant, i.e. with the lowest possible requirements, because the requirements there are at the level of primary school graduation and simple communication skills in the language. (IDI2)

Another significant inequality is the unequal preparedness of local governments for the new regulations concerning intercultural assistants. Some local governments had previously been active in this area, while other municipalities and cities had to develop everything from scratch –

we didn't act on an emergency basis because a war broke out, but we had been building this potential for several years, so we are at a slightly different level than other cities. Let's say, I no longer have a dilemma about where to find an assistant. Or whether to hire one at all. (IDI2)

Education experts point out that the role of an intercultural assistant is particularly important. Assistants have enormous potential, 'they are people who not only influence the child, but also the whole family and, in fact, teachers at school and school staff' (IDI2).

Despite the difficulties mentioned above, school principals mostly agree that refugee children have been 'very well accepted' (FGI4), children at school help each other (FGI6), and children from Ukraine also play active roles, such as student council president or class president (FGI6). In addition, specialists from Ukraine are employed as 'assistants to people with disabilities or teaching

assistants in younger classes' (FGI4), and 'we are increasingly considering employing people, especially in professions, teachers in subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, i.e. in the exact sciences' (ibid.).

At the same time, respondents emphasise that there is a difference between declarative statements and practice in the face of the refugee crisis. The situation varies greatly; there are closed communities, while other solutions have already been developed and implemented.

There are communities where multiculturalism exists, and there are communities that are completely closed, where multiculturalism is out of the question. So, it seems to me that this also varies greatly at the national level. Somewhere solutions are more developed, somewhere not at all. (IDI 4)

Level two: the education system – overloaded and static

Schools are part of the education system and society. They operate in diverse environments where different things matter and have value. Each environment is different, and for students,

what matters most is what is considered most important in their environment. If a teacher knows that there is an ecological crisis, they teach about it, but if they do not believe it, they consider it all to be fake news and that there is no global warming, no problem with melting glaciers, and no issue at all. These are hidden agendas. (IDI 4)

For this reason, changes in the education system are difficult to implement. Respondents feel that the Polish education system is static and overburdened. School is a static system,

it changes very slowly (...) now the world is changing many times faster, and school is not changing many times faster. On the contrary, I somehow feel that it is not keeping up with the world, it is starting to cement itself in some old, non-functional platoons. And the pandemic has shown this very well. (IDI 5)

Static passivity of the system causes educational inequalities resulting from the pace and direction of global change. According to the respondents, such inequalities are evident in the implementation of digital technologies in education (digitalisation) – 'some countries, are already withdrawing from it [digitalization] (...). while we are just entering total digitalisation' (FGI1).

The education system in Poland is overburdened with changes introduced by successive political parties that win elections. Education has become an area of political and ideological friction between right-wing, centrist and left-wing parties. Nevertheless, in discussions with school principals, the aspect that is most emphasised is inclusive education. According to the respondents, schools are overloaded and teachers are exhausted, which is related to the number of assessments and identified disabilities that children bring to schools. 'The situation here is already abnormal in terms of the number of

identified disabilities issued' (FGI1). Disability certificates are issued routinely. Headteachers are concerned about whether they will be able to cope with inclusive education in classes of 25–30 pupils, many of whom have assessments and identified disabilities.

in some classes, there are fewer children without identified disabilities or assessments than those with identified disabilities and assessments, so what kind of individualisation of work can we talk about at this point? If a teacher has a 45-minute lesson, I think this is also something that needs to be considered at the systemic level. (FGI1)

Headteachers report that they are not ready 'We are not ready at all. Special centres may have a little more knowledge on this subject, as do inclusive schools, but inclusive education in public schools. To be honest, this knowledge is really very poor' (FGI1).

According to education experts, there is a lack of coordination and preparation for the implementation of functional assessments.

It will be a very complex model and it will, I would say, radically change the approach to children with special educational needs (...) At the moment, when we have a young person with special educational needs in the school environment, we don't really see the whole process from start to finish. (IDI2)

There are students in the system who do not have systemic support, even though they need it, such as

we have a lot of children who are immersed in depression, who attempt suicide, but there are attempts involving self-harm. And there are a lot of these children. They are not children with special needs in the sense of official diagnoses, but they are absolutely children with special needs. (IDI4)

Leadership is limited to administration at various levels. At the political leadership level, the Ministry of National Education takes actions that are reduced to administration, issuing laws and regulations, but it does not take responsibility for implementation. 'If the Ministry of Education took responsibility for implementation, they would still have to consider whether this is reasonable' (IDI5). School principals report that they are required to provide leadership, but they are not adequately supported:

It is not enough for them to be leaders – there is no leadership towards them either. I call them the minister's line officers or government officers – they are the first point of contact with the whole society when it comes to schools (...) we will lose them if they are not adequately supported. (IDI3)

Actions at the ministerial level are limited to creating a legal framework, while education experts expect

even as citizens, not just as people involved in education (...) that the Ministry of National Education will take responsibility or joint responsibility for the quality of education that takes place, rather than for the quality of the legal infrastructure. (IDI5)

At the same time, high educational aspirations and the belief of parents and students that education enables development and is of value represent an opportunity for the Polish education system.

these parents and children still feel that education changes and can change lives for the better. And that, in fact, everyone is playing on the same team. Only that this team has no captain, no strategy, I don't watch matches in other countries, it doesn't support the younger players who are supposed to enter the field. (IDI6)

Level three: macrostructural changes

Respondents point to greater diversity – national, cultural, and educational. Polish schools are becoming more diverse.

In Poland, this has changed a lot. Take the Ukrainian situation, for example, where there are schools with 40% of children from Ukraine, right? And there are even schools in Poland with 90% foreign children, which is completely new, no one is prepared for this. (IDI8)

Headteachers note 'the growing diversity of students – in terms of nationality, culture, but also in terms of needs and education' (IDI5).

The respondents also note an increase in social and educational inequalities:

Schools are becoming increasingly diverse for various reasons, such as systemic solutions related to inclusive education. This means that several children who did not attend school due to the severity of their disorders or problems are now attending mainstream schools. (IDI8)

Globally, social and educational inequalities are increasing.

This is a terrible problem, where education could be very useful, because there is a clear correlation between your education and how you see your place in the world and your life and career opportunities and everything else, and whether you have hope or are simply feeling hurt, frustrated, and anxious. (IDI6)

Other macrostructural changes pointed out by school principals and education experts include a sharp increase in behavioural disorders, particularly aggressive behaviour, and a public security crisis linked to war, not only in Ukraine but also in the Middle East.

Do educational policies support principals in addressing inequalities?

According to the headteachers, they did not receive sufficient support during the Covid-19 pandemic and later, when the war in Ukraine broke out and schools were faced with an influx of refugees. At the beginning of the crisis, headteachers had to cope on their own –

it turned out that schools were left without any support during the pandemic. It was good that they had the support of the local government. They never had any support from the education authority or any central authorities. They were completely left alone in this situation. And then it happened again – war and a mass influx of refugees, Ukrainian children into schools, where it suddenly turned out that teachers and headteachers were left to deal with it on their own. (IDI 7)

In response to the second research question – does education policy support school principals – several aspects can be identified that hinder principals from taking action to address the educational inequalities they report. On this basis, we can identify several drivers for responsive educational leadership, which are based on equality and social justice (Mazurkiewicz and Fischer, 2021).

Driver 1: Participation of school principals in education policymaking – in different areas and at different levels depending on the education system.

Research shows that school principals feel that ‘no one listens to them’ (FGI6), their proposals are not taken into account, and they are overlooked in communication between the school board and the party filing complaints against them – ‘no one contacts me to find out my position or discuss the matter with me, but instead they immediately call the school board’ (FGI5). Solutions are not consulted widely, but selectively, such as the decision to abolish homework, which was consulted only with students. Headteachers feel that those for whom the changes are designed are not being listened to,

these decisions are being centralised and attempts are being made to centralise the future, but without the support of those implementing them, nothing new will be built (...). Forcing something that neither teachers nor parents want is just a superficial measure that does not work in practice. (IDI 3)

School principals note that they themselves do not take advantage of various communication opportunities, becoming more like implementers of educational policy. Some respondents wonder whether it is not absurd to expect someone to come and ask – ‘I think it would be a bit absurd on my part to expect someone to come to me and ask me, but in any case, I must say here that I have not sought such a path’ (FGI3). On the one hand, there is a sense of lack of agency, but on the other hand, there is a manifestation of it, because school principals place the initiative on their side. The reasons they give are short-sightedness and limited planning skills, and on the other hand, the belief that school principals are merely executors and implementers of policy, have no influence on it at the level of the education system, and it is there that they see the competence to create education policy, not at the local government level. ‘The role of the headteacher is rather that of a policy implementer, but not a creator’ (FGI6); ‘Local governments is more focused on ensuring that the buildings and infrastructure are adequate’ (FGI6). According to the respondents, headteachers should have an influence on educational policy, be supported by local government, participate in conferences, and be

present where 'something important in education is happening' (IDI3). Headteachers have 'a lot of room to maneuver, (...) but they have to deal with a lot of nonsense' (IDI4).

A good driver is the participation of school principals in the creation and implementation of educational policy. Similarly, teachers should participate in the creation of the school's legal and organisational framework.

Driver 2: non-directive education policy, leaving educational leaders autonomy and space for agency

The respondents point to the direct form of education policy. School principals note that education policy differs from other public policies, and that 'something that is introduced is a process, not an order' (FGI2); there is a need to change attitudes and awareness. A prescriptive policy is not supportive or effective. 'Changes that are introduced by regulations are highly ineffective because you cannot impose something. The system needs to be prepared for the introduction of various changes' (FGI2). Respondents also point out that the Ministry introduces solutions but does not give schools the tools to implement them, delegating this effort to schools and headteachers.

Introducing a change, saying that it must be this way and that way, and then telling teachers, 'Now you work out the tools for yourselves?' It's like giving these people double or maybe triple the work. Not only do they have to work something out in their heads, change their approach, for example change the way they teach, but also, even though they don't know how to do it, they must create it themselves. They must create all kinds of tools. (FGI3)

Meanwhile, directive educational policy is part of a trend towards the erosion of teacher autonomy, and the directive form of the core curriculum and the high level of control and inspection may actively contribute to the deprofessionalisation of teachers (Priestley et al. 2016).

Driver 3: feasibility of the proposed changes and equipping schools with the tools to implement them

The difficulty and source of frustration for school principals are the expectations to implement changes that are not feasible in practice, such as organising religious education lessons during the last or first lesson of the day, or individualisation in a class of 25 students, where 40% of students have a special educational needs certificate and the lesson lasts 45 min.

Expecting actions that are difficult to implement, such as inclusive education, individualisation of work with children in overcrowded classrooms, supporting refugees without a sufficient number of cultural assistants, or even actions that are impossible to implement, results in the creation of a façade of action, pretending that everything is fine. (FGI1)

A good driver is the design of changes based on data and widely consulted, which allows for verification of their feasibility and enables school principals to participate in the creation and implementation of educational policy. It

also involves equipping schools with the tools that are necessary to implement new solutions, especially those that are fundamental and have a broad scope.

Driver 4: strategic planning and safeguards for fundamental changes in the education system

Constant changes that cause chaos and force school principals to be constantly on alert are the aspects that appear most strongly in the narratives of all respondents. Principals warn that endless changes hinder the functioning of schools, are chaotic (FGI3) and are not supportive. 'One authority comes and makes changes. The next day, another authority comes and restores the previous state. It is very stressful and very costly' (FGI4). Changes are implemented too quickly. 'We don't have time to get used to one change before another one comes along or they are suspended' (FGI5). Moreover, the changes introduced are cosmetic and superficial, they do not respond to systemic needs but focus on symptomatic action.

we work on symptoms, i.e. if a child starts to show aggression, then it has aggression. We must do something about it, but we don't think in advance about how to work with the family, so there is no such systemic support. (FGI1)

The lack of strategic planning and vision for education in the future are issues related to the quantity and quality of changes mentioned in the previous paragraph. In addition to the endless changes in the education system, the lack of long-term thinking about education is a theme that appears in all group interviews. In the opinion of the respondents, we do not have an education policy.

It is a system of ad hoc measures, where we react to phenomena that appear in the system, and that's it. The ministry acts reactively when a problem arises. Headteachers know nothing about the ministry's plans, they do not know where they are going. (FGI3)

They only receive 'letters at the beginning of the year for Education Day and for the holidays'(FGI2). There is no foresight or looking ahead to the future. 'Refugees are appearing, so the Ministry's guidelines are for refugees. There is a problem with cyberbullying. It is cyberbullying, but what is the long-term policy in this area? We do not know, and we still have it' (FGI2). School principals expect a clear, consistent and stable education policy, 'regardless of political divisions' (FGI5).

Conclusion and discussion

In discussions about education policy with school principals and education experts (in focus and individual interviews), we clearly felt the inconsistency, or even contradiction, between the expected changes at the systemic level and their feasibility in practice. There are many aspects that cause system overload, overwhelm and do not ensure participation in the process of creating education policy. School principals feel that there is too much and it is too difficult.

Public policy expectations are not always feasible due to various constraints and barriers.

Anomie refers to a lack of coherence in organisational goals and a disconnect between educational policy and school reality (Kozlova 2013). Anomie manifests itself in a weakening of social trust, a blurring of norms and a lack of coherence between educational policy and school practice (Kozlova 2013). It is also a permanent feature of contemporary social reality (Wrzesień 2017).

Research results indicate that anomie encompasses two dimensions: a breakdown in organisational feasibility and a breakdown in educational leadership. At the organisational level, this primarily involves barriers to individualising work with students, such as overcrowded classrooms, refugees who do not speak Polish, students requiring special education, and an increase in aggressive behaviour and behavioural disorders. It also involves the introduction of organisationally unfeasible solutions, such as religion lessons at the beginning or end of the school day for all classes. This undermines the trust and motivation of educational leaders to implement the expected changes. The changes are being introduced too quickly, which, on the one hand, makes them superficial and, on the other hand, significantly reduces the transparency of the process. The pace of change causes distrust of education policy and resistance to change, because 'they don't know for sure if it will be like that' (FGI1) and 'a lack of confidence that the changes will be good, that they will cause as little loss as possible (...) and that they will not translate into a sense of threat for parents and students' (FGI4). Permanent changes in regulations mean that 'the headteacher must be constantly vigilant' (FGI4). Headteachers do not have enough time to prepare for the changes, new rules are introduced during the school year. Respondents do not know what 'the state expects of them' (FGI3). On the one hand, this significantly limits the educational leadership of headteachers, and on the other, it creates a sense of wasted effort and work that they put into adapting to constant changes. All school principals declare that they need an education system that is stable and reliable. All this makes principals feel that the impossible is being demanded of them. The expectations of the system are unachievable.

Anomie in educational leadership is primarily characterised by insufficient autonomy, insufficient participation in the process of creating educational policy, and limiting the role of school principals to that of implementers of educational policy and administrators. Educational leadership is limited to administration at various levels. At the political leadership level, the Ministry of National Education takes actions that are 'reduced to administration, issuing laws and regulations, but it does not take responsibility for implementation' (IDI5). Principals report that they are required to provide leadership, but they are not adequately supported. Actions at the ministerial level are limited to creating a legal framework, while education experts expect that the government will take

responsibility or co-responsibility for the quality of education that takes place, and not for the quality of the legal infrastructure.

The consequences of anomie manifest primarily in the deregulation of social norms and values, which in turn weakens the effectiveness of both socialisation processes and mechanisms of social control. This phenomenon is particularly evident within the educational sphere, where schools lose their ability to shape coherent civic and social attitudes. As normative frameworks lose their regulatory function, this contributes to confusion, disorientation, and a decline in social cohesion (Wrzesień 2017). Furthermore, empirical findings indicate additional effects of anomie, including a widespread lack of trust, diminished autonomy, resistance to change, a heightened sense of threat, and a perceived significant effort invested in the implementation of new initiatives and reforms.

As a result of this analysis and study, principals can be suggested to participate in education policy – taking in different areas and levels (Driver 1), support the creation of non-directive educational policy, that helps to build autonomy and agency (Driver 2), require from the system and provide teachers with tools to implement changes (Driver 3) and strategic planning (Driver 4).

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Appendix 1 Code tree

Codes from literature:

- educational inequalities, identified by principals and educational experts,
- refugees and migrants (no knowledge of polish language),
- other problems and disorders,
- unequal access to resources,
- insufficient financial resources,
- outdated infrastructure,
- staff shortages (specialists),
- educational system,
- macrostructural changes,
- increase in the number of students with special educational needs.

Codes emerged inductively via Maxqda:

- equal educational opportunities,
- responsibility for the quality of education,
- educational inequalities – other,
- anomie,
- refugees at school – positive aspects,
- deficit of social and emotional competences,
- individualisation – difficulties,
- decisions – pathologies,
- refugees at school – unequal treatment,
- refugees at school – difficulties,
- behavioural disorders – a serious problem,
- inclusive education difficulties,
- various (insufficient) preparation of teachers for work,
- access to resources,
- inequalities at the organisational level,
- insufficient teacher salaries.

Inductive codes - thematic code grouping:

- Competencies (shortage of parenting skills among teachers, insufficient competence of teachers, school principals focus on their managerial role, social and emotional competencies deficit among students, literacy competence deficit),
- Refugees and migrants (education in Poland 'as a transitional state', no language of polish language, other problems and disorders, uneven preparation of local governments),
- Unequal access to resources (lack of time, insufficient financial resources, outdated infrastructure, staff shortages (specialists)),
- Individualisation (overcrowded classrooms, increase in the number of students with special educational needs, no tools for functional assessment, inflation tips for individualisation, increase in behavioural disorders, increase in aggression at school),
- Educational system (leadership limited to administration at various levels, inequalities resulting from different social backgrounds of schools, expecting leadership from directors vs. lack of support, perception of school as an unattractive place, unwanted responsibility for the quality of education, challenges related to inclusive education),
- Macrostructural changes (greater diversity, war, increase in behavioural disorders, increased social and educational inequalities).