

Stanisława Byra / Zenon Gajdzica

# Teachers' Beliefs about Inclusive Education

A Study in the Context of Major Increases in  
Refugee Learners



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## Introduction

Inclusive education is currently not only one of the main currents in the field of education of learners with special developmental needs, but also an important factor in changing whole educational systems, oriented towards improving the quality of education and teaching for all learners. It is therefore not surprising that researchers are particularly interested in the determinants of its quality. Multiple studies have focused on teachers – their competencies to work with a group of learners with diverse abilities and needs, and their attitudes towards the assumptions underlying inclusive education and the ways of implementing it. An analysis of a number of studies shows that teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education increase the acceptance of diversity in school, and lead to the construction of favourable solutions in the field (Romi & Leyser, 2006) as well as to the intensification of inclusive practices (Sharma & Sokal, 2016), which ultimately contributes to a successful outcome of this approach (Monsenet et al., 2014).

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education have many determinants (Guillemot et al., 2022), most of them subject to transformations, which encourages researchers to always continue their explorations, identifying new and updating previously identified factors. The attitudes of teachers towards high quality education for all learners presented and considered in the book fit within these trends. Although the research was carried out on a group of Polish teachers, it shows trends typical of many other countries and therefore provides universal knowledge. However, it also includes unique factors such as the sudden emergence of a large group of refugee children from Ukraine in the education system, as well as the announcement of a radical system reform model by the Ministry of Science and Education.

The main aim of the research presented in this book is to find out about the opinions (expressed by the degree of acceptance) of Polish teachers working at mainstream schools and pre-schools on selected assumptions and organisational solutions underlying inclusive education, and to examine these opinions in terms of selected demographic traits of teachers: gender, place of residence, seniority/length of service and the level of education taught (pre-school, primary school

levels 1 to 3, primary school levels 4 to 8, secondary school) and the type of facility (state, non-state).

An important aim also involves identifying the opinions studied in a temporal perspective – in two measurements (2020 and 2022), making it possible to capture the transformations in the area of acceptance of selected theoretical and organisational assumptions underlying inclusive education. It is worth emphasising at this point that longitudinal studies of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are virtually absent from the literature (Guillemot et al., 2020), which we believe makes the results presented here even more interesting.

## Chapter 1.

# Essence and contextuality of inclusive education

In seeking the non-educational roots of inclusive education, it is worth tracing them back to two historical references. The first one is associated with the social protests of disadvantaged groups, including persons with disabilities. The aim of these protests was, among other things, to obtain equal/fair access to education in mainstream schools (Barnartt & Scotch, 2002). The other reference is the Holocaust, i. e. the mass extermination of people deemed deviant and/or socially undesirable by Nazi Germany. As a corollary of collective historical memory, actions are recognised aimed at creating a tolerant society that is open to diversity (Wagner, 2018). As a result, we can seek the origins of inclusive education in the struggle for recognition and in the perspective of coexistence and respect for diversity (Gajdzica, 2022).

It is generally accepted that the beginnings of inclusive education should be linked to the social activism of parents of children with disabilities in the Nordic countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Dyson & Forlin, 1999). Parents dissatisfied with segregated education demanded that their children be integrated into mainstream education in regular schools, so that they could benefit from equal educational opportunities (Walton, 2018). The term “inclusive education” appeared in the educational literature in the early 1990s and quickly gained popularity in countries of the Global North, in particular in Canada and the USA (Szumski, 2019).

Many studies on inclusive education contain the assertion that the very term “inclusion”, as applied to the processes of education and learning, is vague, ambiguous, and even controversial (Ryndak et al., 2000; Speck, 2013; Lechta, 2016). Consequently, the concept of inclusive education (educational inclusion) happens to be used in various connotations, with the following meanings: scientific theory, concept of educational transformations, educational model, concept of methodological work, concept of organisational work, set of educational conditions, paradigm, and even ideology (Loreman, 2017; Gajdzica, 2020; Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023). It should therefore come as no surprise that inclusive education in practice is an internally diverse and still controversial

concept (Mitchell, 2006). This is a result of the circumstances of its parallel construction in many cultures and educational systems (Dyson & Millward, 2000; Loreman, 2017). Although there is relative consensus in the area of the ethical and axiological foundations (equity, equality, value of diversity, etc.), divergences emerge in the area of the praxeological (and therefore also organisational and methodological) premises underlying inclusive education. As a result, many currents can be discerned within it that evolve over time, and that are more or less typical of the space of different educational cultures (Mazurek & Winzer, 1994; Zamkowska, 2004; Mitchell, 2005; Hornby, 2014; Gajdzica et al., 2020). This, in turn, entails divergent concepts of school and of its broadly defined culture of inclusion.

The wealth of connotations and views of inclusive education encourages attempts to classify them. We present several selected suggestions for distinguishing currents/concepts of inclusive education in the section that follows, hoping that they can provide a good introduction, contributing to a better understanding of our research presented in the book. The starting point is provided by the analysis by Mel Ainscow and Susie Miles, who identified the following five perspectives under the term of educational inclusion:

- disability and “special educational needs”,
- disciplinary exclusions,
- groups vulnerable to exclusion,
- the promotion of a school for all,
- education for all (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Although the diagnosed typology of research fields consists of inseparable areas, it nevertheless makes it possible to view the topic of our research systemically. The first three areas refer to particular groups of learners being included, whereas the last two areas show the inclusion perspective as a strategy for changing education, school, and the culture surrounding it. Although in many parts of the book we focus on learners with disabilities (this group continues to be the main beneficiary of inclusion processes in many currents), our interest remains centred primarily on schools and on quality education for all.

Despite the multifaceted diversity, some generalisations can be made in the area of the transformations of inclusive education. Kerstin Göransson and Claes Nilholm (2014) identified and described these developments on the basis of a review of the definitions of inclusive education. The research they presented concerns inclusion of learners with disabilities, but the mechanisms of change they described can equally well be applied to a broad form of inclusive education that includes all learners belonging to socially underprivileged groups and/or having learning difficulties for a variety of reasons. As a result of their analyses, Kerstin Göransson and Claes Nilholm (2014) distinguished four categories of

definitions reflecting the stages of inclusive education transformations. We supplement their presentation with our own comments and references to the literature.

The basic premise underlying the first group of definitions involves mainstreaming of learners with disabilities. Although, according to the cited authors, few researchers explicitly suggest the category of place as a fundamental aspect of educational inclusion, it does play a key role in many definitions and is the first feature to be mentioned. Furthermore, this education should take place in groups of learners of the same biological age and be characterised by support given to the learners being included. An example of this approach is the definition presented in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Special Education* (Reynolds & Flechter-Janzen, 2002, p. 495), which identifies several key assumptions that form the foundations underlying inclusive education, namely:

- placing learners with disabilities in general education classrooms;
- educating learners with disabilities with learners of the same age who do not have disabilities;
- including all learners in the mainstream of education using special support;
- belonging of all learners to the school community.

In its centre, the second group of definitions has the special needs of the learners being included and the process of meeting these needs. Their impact on the education of other learners is, in turn, marginalised. An example of inclusive education understood in this manner is the approach of David Mitchell (2008), who sees it as educating people with special educational needs in a typical school environment. In this view, inclusive education is more than merely placing the group of learners being integrated in the space of a mainstream school, as it also means implementing a whole set of rules, changes in curricula and teaching methods, as well as adjustments to assessment techniques and accessibility rules (Mitchell, 2016). This, in turn, requires appropriate teacher support in the classroom space. Inclusive education is therefore a complex strategy aimed primarily at mainstreaming learners with disabilities (Gajdzica, 2020).

Supporting learners with special educational needs (the concept of special needs being typical of the first two groups of definitions) taking place in the space of a mainstream school/classroom is not without effect on the other learners. As a result of this, it has been noted that inclusive education cannot be considered globally as an organisational form covering only the learners being mainstreamed. Consequently, the next group of definitions approaches inclusive education from the point of view of each learner. This, on its part, leads to the recognition of the individual needs of all learners – including those with relatively normal development and socialisation. These definitions place the form of

education and learning being discussed in the broader context of general education. The following assumptions sum up this approach:

- inclusive education makes the school a place of education for all children;
- inclusive education meets the needs of every learner in a better way;
- inclusive education is a process aimed at seeking the most normal educational pathways possible for all children (Thomazet, 2009, after: Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, p. 269).

An example of such an approach can also be found in the *Model of Education for All* (2020) designed in Poland, according to which inclusive education should be understood as “quality education for all children, pupils and adult learners, organised together with their peers in the place where they live. High quality implies both the active involvement and participation of each child/learner in the teaching/learning process, social inclusion, as well as progress in individual development and educational outcomes” (*Model edukacji dla wszystkich*, 2020, p. 21).

The three groups of definitions are descriptive in their nature, as they describe the forms of educational organisation existing in practice (Szumski, 2019). The last group, presented below, is characterised by its projective and prescriptive nature. The definitions classified in this group are aimed at constructing organisational visions of education for all, as suggested by the title. Concepts of inclusive education understood in this way highlight a community built on an inclusive culture. The culture of such a community is to be based on diversity, on the nurturing of equality and equity, and on the removal of all barriers to inclusion, which operates in a natural way (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Thus, the category of inclusion loses its *raison d'être* because there is only one current of education that includes all learners (Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Slee, 2011). As a result, there can be no talk of any group of learners being included, as no marginalising/exclusionary practices are in operation. The vision expressed in this group of definitions discussed above is sometimes described as a postulate of absolutisation, far removed from reality and in practice considered unrealistic by some researchers (Speck, 2013).

It is difficult to unequivocally place the current Polish inclusive education in this typology. On the one hand, educational practice continues to show that its practical implementation is very deeply rooted in the assumptions of special pedagogy. This is reflected in the definitions, focusing mainly on recognising the needs of the learners being included. On the other hand, there are increasingly clear symptoms of this area being treated as an immanent field of education in a broad sense, with an emphasis on the individual needs of all learners (Gajdzica et al., 2021).

Among the many concepts of identifying the currents/types of inclusive education present in the literature, it is worth pointing to yet another differentiating criterion. It involves the relationship of inclusive education to special education. Although in practice these currents interpenetrate and remain in many aspects convergent, the theoretical positions demonstrate divergences in terms of the following: references to propositions developed in the context of special education, ontological and paradigmatic assumptions for the practice of teaching, and, as a result, also the key categories constituting the conceptual foundations. Generally, the first concept assumes that inclusive education is a continuation (sometimes referred to as a superstructure) of special education (Lechta, 2016; Loreman, 2017; Gajdzica, 2020). This usually leads to the recognition of the co-existence of both types of education and different learning pathways for learners with special educational needs (Hornby, 2020). As a result of these assumptions, it can be described as reconstructive inclusive education (reconstructing the assumptions underlying special education and adapting them to the realities of a mainstream school). The second current assumes that it should be completely divergent from the assumptions of special education. This, in turn, leads to an emphasis placed in practice on a single educational pathway for all learners (Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Slee, 2011). Therefore, it constitutes deconstructive inclusive education (rejecting the assumptions developed in special education and building new principles for inclusion into mainstream schools).

The main differentiating criteria are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical presentation of the differences between reconstructive and deconstructive inclusion

Distinguishing criterion	Reconstructive inclusion	Deconstructive inclusion
Attitudes towards the assumptions underlying special education	Continuation / superstructure / modification	Rejection
Paradigmatic rooting	Positivist (structural-functional)	Interpretative (constructivist, critical)
Embedment in didactics	Instructional / normative	Constructivist / critical
Key categories	Disability, special educational needs, specialist support, mainstream, adaptation, specialist teacher competencies	Diversity, equal access, equity, school for all, mainstream curriculum, inclusive school culture, barriers
Contextual categories	Nearest environment (in this approach: that of the local area mainstream school), individualisation, barrier, school for all, human rights	Educational current, personalisation, teachers' competencies to work with a heterogeneous group



Table 1 (Continued)

Distinguishing criterion	Reconstructive inclusion	Deconstructive inclusion
Key feature	Bringing together in one space two cultures of education: special and mainstream – creating a borderland culture	Building a new, original culture
Perspective on the learner	Functional and social	Social
Organisational goal	Mainstreaming	Removing barriers
Perception of educational needs	Special and shared	Different – personalised ways of meeting all needs
Approach to the education system	Pluralistic (one of many forms of education)	Rejection of educational pluralism (the only form of education)

(own compilation based on: Mällner et al., 2004; Topping & Maloney, 2005; Allan, 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Zacharuk, 2008; Loreman, 2009; Zamkowska, 2009; Slee, 2011; Kruk-Lasocka, 2012; Speck, 2013; Bartoňová, 2014; Peng & Potměšil, 2015; Lechta, 2016; Sadowska, 2018; Gajdzica, 2020; Nadachowicz & Bilewicz, 2020).

Naturally, in practice it is difficult to find pure forms of concepts defined in such a specific manner. They do not usually appear in explicit formulas, so the juxtapositions presented within one and the other concept should be perceived as idealistic and projective. Nevertheless, the collation of the categories presented in the table makes it possible to show the divergences within inclusive education, which encourages a somewhat more detailed characterisation of reconstructive and deconstructive inclusion.

The concept conventionally referred to as reconstructive inclusive education represents a certain continuation and superstructure of special education. It is based on an evolution of the assumptions underlying special pedagogy and on reconstructing them for the purposes of inclusive education – in other words, on their adaptation to the conditions of a mainstream school. As a result (despite the absence of such declarations on the part of its authors), it refers, in many of its foundations, to the culture of special education (involving separation/segregation) with the premise of modifying its organisational assumptions. Thus, the key categories building the concept of reconstructive inclusion are those typical of special pedagogy (disability, special educational needs, specialist support, individualisation, specialist teacher competencies) supplemented by categories related to mainstream education (the nearest environment, school for all, equal access). The two groups are bonded together by the categories of mainstream, barriers, and adaptation. This approach manifests itself more often in selected elements of the concept of educational inclusion designed in Central European countries, including Poland (Zacharuk, 2008; Zamkowska, 2009; Kruk-Lasocka, 2012; Speck, 2013; Peng & Potměšil, 2015; Lechta, 2016).

One of the typical features of this current is the juxtaposition of two cultures of education, special and mainstream, within one space. In this framework, learners with special needs remain influenced by the former, and the other learners – by the latter. The contamination of both areas of education requires some structuring, hence the importance gained by the concept of special educational needs (along with disability and/or other difficulties and limitations related to them within the scope discussed) and by the mainstream of work. The theoretical foundations of educating a learner with special needs are embedded in the body of work of special pedagogy. The essence of mainstream education, in turn, is based on premises developed on the basis of general pedagogy, including in particular general didactics and teaching methodologies. This tradition provides a body of experience rooted in positivist currents of practising science, above all in quasi-behavioural, instructional, and normative didactics (Gajdzica, 2020).

Although inclusive education understood in this way is declaratively linked above all to the social model of disability, it rests in many aspects upon functional assumptions, which in turn form the basis for perceiving special educational needs and individualising work with learners with special educational needs (Müller et al., 2004; Bartoňová, 2014; Lechta, 2016; Nadachowicz & Bilewicz, 2020).

The sets of conceptual assumptions underlying educational inclusion understood in this way usually open with the word “all” – e.g., all children attend the nearest (local area) school, all children study in regular classrooms with their peers, all learners are valued, all children follow similar curricula, all children are supported, etc. (Topping & Maloney, 2005, p. 6; Loreman, 2009, p. 43). Another feature of the concepts discussed here involves the notions used: the inclusion of all learners in mainstream education, the belonging of all learners to the school community (Reynolds & Flechter-Janzen, 2002, p. 495; Topping & Maloney, 2005, p. 6).

The primary aim of inclusion is identified with educational mainstreaming. The objective, therefore, is to make sure that all learners (regardless of their limitations and abilities) can participate fully in the classroom and school community. In this approach, mainstream educational activities are defined by the mainstream school category. In the case of class work, the mainstream represents the fundamental point of reference for all organisational processes. For example, organising class work in line with the co-teaching strategy, an alternative teaching technique, implies the functioning of two streams: a mainstream and a sidestream (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010, p. 12). The sidestream generally includes learners who require special support, the intensity of which usually makes integration into mainstream class work difficult. Naturally, specifying the mainstream class work in more detail involves having clear assumptions and remains linked to the category of participation.

Participation includes not only physical presence in the space of a mainstream school, but also active contribution to classroom activities, work on the tasks performed in the course of education, cooperation in problem solving, meeting individual and group needs, participation in school culture, and building the latter (Gajdzica, 2020).

The second concept, conventionally referred to as deconstructive educational inclusion, refers in its strategic assumptions above all to the identification and removal of barriers and of exclusionary/marginalising factors in education (Slee, 2011), and in this respect also of the practices of imposing a framework of desirable development on learners that reinforces marginalising tendencies (Slee, 2014).

Important categories building this concept include diversity, equal access, equity, school for all, mainstream curriculum, barriers, and inclusive school culture (Allan, 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Slee, 2011; Sadowska, 2018). The basis underlying the design of this concept is dissociation from the legacy of special education. In fact, it is a form of education largely based on a criticism of special education (of its contradictions, weaknesses, selectivity, neophytism of individualisation, primitive revalidation, glorification of the medical model of disability, segregation/separation practices, etc.) (Gajdzica, 2020). The concept is characterised by the denial of the mechanisms that generate barriers in mainstream education. Furthermore, its origin can be traced to the criticism of the pluralistic (multi-track) approach to the organisation of the education system. The authors of this concept refer exclusively to the social model of disability and rely on the assumptions of constructivist pedagogy. The strategic categories of the deconstructive inclusion definition group are marginalisation/exclusion and barriers. Identification and removal of barriers as well as elimination of the negative processes of marginalisation represent the starting point for creating a genuine culture of inclusive education – laying the foundations for the realisation of the premise of equal participation in education (Allan, 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Slee, 2011).

The guiding motto in this current is to build an inclusive school culture from the ground up. An inclusive school can be neither a modified special needs school, nor a modified mainstream school. It should be a school without barriers, which in practice are generated not only by the dominant culture (of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness) but also by the dominated culture (of disability). The school dichotomy is therefore not a good solution, according to the representatives of this current, for the building of a culture of inclusive education. The latter must not involve trying to adjust learners with disabilities to the mainstream education system (Slee, 2004). It should be based on a profound reform of the system and on building a culture of inclusion from the ground up (Slee, 2011).

To recapitulate, the concept is based on a criticism of inclusive mainstream school built on the experiences and traditions of special needs and mainstream education creating a space of a cultural and educational borderland – where various normative regulations, rules of play, cultural codes, etc. co-exist in one area, and where diverse groups, different cultures and expectations clash (Jałowiecki & Karpalski, 2011; Gołdyga, 2013). The concept of deconstructive educational inclusion is thus embedded not only in the idea of deconstructing special education, but also in the rejection of the typical mainstream school culture. Therefore, inclusive education placed in the deconstructive current cannot be built on the foundation of a mainstream school (Thomas & Loxley, 2007), but neither is it a new version of special education. Treating inclusive education in this way would limit its potential and even destroy its innovative nature. Inclusive pedagogy, in a broad sense, should therefore be regarded as a sub-discipline of pedagogy, rather than as a new version of special pedagogy (Hinz, 2009 after: Szumski & Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2010).

When discussing the educational, social and cultural determinants of the design of both currents, it is worth mentioning that the first one (reconstructive inclusion) refers more to learners with disabilities. Simplifying, one can describe this group as the main beneficiaries of inclusion. The second current (deconstructive inclusion), on the other hand, draws its assumptions more strongly from all possible differences between learners: cultural, religious, gender, economic, and functional ones. Thus, the target group for inclusion consists of all disadvantaged learners: those with core curriculum difficulties, adaptation problems, as well as above-average abilities or talents. It should not be found surprising, therefore, that in countries with less cultural diversity and/or tendencies of resistance against cultural and religious diversity, the dominant approach is associated with the first current. The second current, in turn, is likely to develop more dynamically in countries that are diverse in the respects mentioned above, where cultural and religious diversity is the norm in classrooms, and where gender and social issues are a significant part of the state's social policy.

The proposition formulated above, speculative in its nature, probably requires validation, nevertheless in Central and Eastern European countries (where in practice the indicated intercultural education issues occur less intensely) inclusive tendencies typical of the first current prevail, whereas in Scandinavia, North America, and some Western European countries, the deconstructive current has been developing more vigorously (Gajdzica, 2020).

The cited typologies of inclusive education do not exhaust all of its possible typologies, but they do confirm the proposition formulated earlier, namely that the concept represents an internally diverse, evolving project, rich in various connotations.

In the perspective adopted here, we assume inclusive education to include all the processes and activities aimed at formulating the totality of human capabilities, sensitive to the individual needs of each person regardless of their developmental potential and socialisation skills. We see the learners' identified challenges as a consequence of functional and/or socially constructed disorders. Inclusive education processes take place in non-segregated and non-separated conditions, i.e. in non-categorising circumstances, respecting and taking into account the diverse capacities and needs of the individuals being educated. Its important tasks include increasing social participation, especially of individuals who are developmentally/socially (culturally, economically) disadvantaged, and enhancing the quality of education for all learners, also those with relatively normal development. An essential premise of inclusive education involves anticipating, identifying and eliminating all barriers (mental, cultural, and architectural) that prevent/hinder inclusion processes, as well as creating a culture of working together built on a sense of community, respect, equality, and recognising diversity as a value. We perceive inclusive education as a process that draws on the achievements of various social and human sciences, including special pedagogy, with the aim of reconstructing these outputs to create optimal developmental conditions for all learners in mainstream institutions (Gajdzica, 2020).

Furthermore, we assume that inclusive education is a model that takes a specific organisational form based on constructivist strategies of working with a diverse group in a single current, taking into account processes of supporting all learners and a personalistic approach to the fulfilment of their needs.

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## Chapter 2.

# Selected contexts and determinants of the transformations of inclusive education in Poland

Schools create a microclimate that mirrors social relations, attitudes, as well as rules and norms. The school microclimate represents a compilation of external and internal factors associated with culture. The former represent primarily the social culture around the school, whereas the latter include the institutional culture created within the specific school. School culture is therefore an element of the broad social culture and encompasses the totality of beliefs, views, attitudes, relationships, and principles shaping all aspects of the school's functioning as an institution, organisation, and community (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2015, p. 80). Therefore, when discussing the context of inclusive education in Poland, it is worth making at least a brief reference to the broader cultural determinants related to multiculturalism, among other things.

Until recently, Poland could hardly be seen as a culturally diverse country. For example, in the National Census (NSP) conducted in 2011, the number of self-declarations of belonging to a national or ethnic minority (except the indications of Silesian nationality, which is not officially recognised in Poland) amounted to only 394,000, which accounted for around one per cent of Poland's population at that time, and included just under 39,000 indications of Ukrainian nationality (*Siódmy raport ...*, 2020, p. 2). In turn, the number of learners within the individual national minorities, ethnic minorities and regional language communities for which an educational subsidy was calculated in the 2017/2018 school year was just under 80,000 (approx. 1.7% of all learners), including slightly over 3,000 Ukrainian learners. (*Siódmy raport...*, 2020, p. 57). The historical origins of this situation can be traced to the migrations of minorities (e.g., the German and the Jewish ones), inhabiting the territory of present-day Poland for many centuries, outside the country's post-war borders, as well as to Poland's isolation and to the unification policy pursued by the communist authorities. Consequently, Poles had negligible relations with immigrants and cultural minorities (including religious and even denominational ones) until the 1990s. Religious diversity is also low in Poland, which in practice impoverishes discourse on refugees and immigrants arriving in Poland (Cekiera, 2022). Cultural transfer, understood as

long-term (post-World War Two in this approach) interpenetration of cultural content as a result of the development processes of societies in Poland, was practically absent (Szaban, 2020). The circumstances determining monoculturalism began to change with the increase in economic migration of Poles after 1989 and the improvement of the standard of living of the Polish population, which was also conducive to tourist travel. The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw an influx of economic migration from Asia and Eastern Europe (especially Ukraine). These experiences fostered the creation of “cultural borderlands”. Unfortunately, increasing multiculturalism also reinforced nationalist attitudes, typical of far-right social movements (Nikitorowicz, 2017).

The situation changed markedly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Researchers investigating migration estimate that more than 1.35 million Ukrainians had already been living in Poland before February 2022, while around 3 million refugees arrived in Poland in the first dozen weeks or so following the invasion (Duszczuk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Boroń & Gromkowska-Melosik, 2022). The social structure of the refugee population differed significantly from that of economic migrants before 2022. Ukrainians working in Poland before the war were mostly men, while the refugees arriving after February 2022 were predominantly women, children, and youth, with 26% under the age of 18 (Babińska et al., 2022). This change represented not only a social and economic challenge, but also an educational one. According to data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science, one year after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, 190,000 Ukrainian children were present in Polish pre-schools and schools (*MEiN: W polskich szkołach i przedszkolach,...* 2023).

Poland's low cultural diversity (especially until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) also influenced, to some extent, attitudes towards people with disabilities, who were often perceived as different, or even alien. Thus, persons with disabilities undoubtedly experienced a post-colonial policy, based on stereotypes and creating a distance towards the Others. A certain specificity could be noticed here, typical of monocultural communities. It can be described using the following categories:

- negative ones – ignorance, fear, pity, misunderstanding, distancing;
- ambivalent ones – passivity, indifference;
- positive ones – curiosity, solidarity (Gajdzica et al., 2020).

However, it can hardly be argued that the attitudes of Poles towards persons with disabilities were significantly different under real socialism compared to the attitudes of people in other countries. More recent comparative research does not demonstrate particularly significant differences between attitudes in the Polish population and in other countries with regard to the matter (Bera & Korczyński, 2012; Gajdzica, 2013). Nevertheless, assuming that the culture of social and educational inclusion grows in direct proportion to the cultural diversity within the

given community, it needs to be argued that the changes in the Polish society over the recent decades, as described above, have been conducive to the transformation of attitudes towards educational inclusion and building an inclusive school culture.

Four periods can be distinguished following an analysis of the legislation standardising the Polish educational system with regard to learners with special educational needs after the systemic turning point of 1989:

- The first period was that preceding the introduction of legal and formal conditions for inclusive education in 1991. It was a time when segregated education for learners with disabilities prevailed, while other special needs were marginalised.
- The second period, between 1991 and 2010, corresponded to the years of the so-called inclusive education boom. Special educational needs other than those related to disabilities began to be recognised then.
- The third period started in 2010 after the adoption of a package of regulations describing comprehensive changes in the education of learners with special needs and the organisation and provision of psychological and pedagogical assistance to them. At that time, intensified efforts were made to develop inclusive education catering also to learners with special needs other than those related to disabilities (Cytowska, 2016).
- The fourth period started in 2020, when the Ministry of Education announced a plan to build quality education for all learners (*Model edukacji dla wszystkich*, 2020). After heated discussions and a reorganisation of the concept, the change started to be implemented, in small steps, in 2022.

In the 2019/2020 school year, as many as 30% of learners in Poland were covered by various forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance, whereas 70% of learners with a statement of special education needs (mainly due to disabilities) were pursuing compulsory education in mainstream facilities (*Model edukacji dla wszystkich*, 2020, p. 12). Psychological and pedagogical assistance is therefore an important component of the work of mainstream schools. The inclusive form of education for learners with disabilities has become statistically dominant compared to education provided in special institutions. It is worth recalling that although broadly defined inclusive education used to be associated for many years in Poland primarily with learners with disabilities, it also includes other disadvantaged groups (e.g., learners with emotional disorders and partial learning difficulties, children of immigrants and refugees, children growing up in poverty-stricken families, transgender and homosexual learners, and learners with gender identification problems). However, the physical presence of these learners in mainstream schools is not tantamount to the actual implementation of quality inclusive education (Gajdzica, 2022). Research findings indicate that



the mainstream schools are insufficiently prepared to deliver inclusive education. A key problem is the low degree of teachers' readiness (negative or ambivalent attitudes) to implement inclusive education (Kołodziejczyk, 2020, Skibska, 2021) and the related insufficient knowledge and methodological competencies (especially in the case of subject teachers) when it comes to working with a diverse group (Janiszewska-Nieścioruk, 2016; Chrzanowska, 2019; Skotnicka, 2019; Gajdzica, 2020). In addition, research findings indicate that teachers are insufficiently prepared for diagnosing learners' special needs (Kochanowska, 2015; Skibska, Borzecka, & Twaróg-Kanus, 2020). According to teachers, other significant problems concern the scarcity of specialists and assistants performing therapeutic and care tasks in a mainstream setting (Skotnicka, 2019; Nowak, 2020) and the lack of organisational and methodological support (Chrzanowska, 2019; Gajdzica, 2020; Nowak, 2020).

Despite the problems indicated above, inclusive education is a rapidly growing form of education in Poland. It is now becoming a catalyst for transformations of the entire education system aimed at improving the quality for all learners, in line with the assumption that every learner has their own personal needs and it is important to meet the latter as fully as possible through a variety of ways, methods, and means.

The SWOT analysis presented below, performed several years ago, summarises to some degree the strengths and weaknesses of inclusive education in Poland as well as the related opportunities and threats. Due to the constant changes and the dynamic surge in interculturalism in Polish schools, the analysis has been supplemented and adapted to match the current reality.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of inclusive education in Poland, from the point of view of culture, conditions, and educational practices

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased public awareness of the needs and capabilities of people with disabilities.</li> <li>- Increased public acceptance of inclusive education.</li> <li>- Increased public awareness of parents of learners with disabilities.</li> <li>- Emancipation of milieus of persons with disabilities.</li> <li>- Statistical increase in the number of learners with disabilities taught in mainstream schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient participation of parents of learners with disabilities and of experts in the creation of educational policy at the national and local level.</li> <li>- Apparent accountability of local governments for spending additional resources on the education of learners with a statement of special education needs.</li> <li>- Insufficient competencies of subject teachers to work with a heterogeneous group.</li> </ul>

Table 2 (Continued)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased number of mainstream school teachers qualified to work with learners with SEN, especially at the primary school levels 1 to 3 education stage.</li> <li>- Growing number of scientific publications (especially conceptual considerations) on educational inclusion.</li> <li>- Removal of architectural barriers in mainstream schools.</li> <li>- Increased number of good practices in the field of differentiated instruction.</li> <li>- Increased number of NGOs working for school development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ambivalent attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education.</li> <li>- Teachers' mental barriers.</li> <li>- Creation, in practice, of a simplified concept of educational inclusion based on the reconstruction of the assumptions underlying special education.</li> <li>- Underestimation of the role of school culture in creating inclusive education.</li> <li>- Insufficient number of studies on the conditions for educational inclusion.</li> <li>- Insufficient preparation of schools to accommodate learners from Ukrainian refugee families.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthened social activity of people with disabilities, parents of learners with disabilities and experts in reforming the special education system.</li> <li>- Increased multiculturalism of society.</li> <li>- Intercultural enrichment of the school related to the enrolment of a significant number of learners from Ukraine.</li> <li>- Development of the concept of inclusive education based on elements of deconstruction of special pedagogy.</li> <li>- Change in the training of mainstream schools teachers: equipping them with competencies to work with a diverse group.</li> <li>- Declining learner numbers (demographic decline), resulting in smaller class size.</li> <li>- Expansion of the base of teaching resources and methodological aids.</li> <li>- Development of a concept for change aimed at supporting inclusive education by the Ministry of Education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political transformations: moving away from democratic standards (also in the area of educational management).</li> <li>- Increase in negative social attitudes towards otherness.</li> <li>- Perceiving inclusion as an ideology.</li> <li>- Political tendencies to return to segregationist practices in the education system.</li> <li>- Ignoring the opinions of experts and parents in the building of an organisational culture of inclusive school.</li> <li>- Economic crisis and perceiving inclusive education as very expensive.</li> <li>- Conservative embeddedness of the school model in instructional didactics.</li> <li>- Continued glorification of the medical model of disability of learners in social practice</li> </ul>

(based on: Gajdzica et al., 2020, p. 56).

Reference can be made to several fundamental changes when seeking systemic solutions aimed at transforming the diagnosed state. The first change is related to acquiring/improving the competencies of mainstream school teachers to work with a diverse group. This requires above all a change in the standards of teaching and further training of teachers (especially subject teachers), which continues to encounter resistance especially among political decision-makers. The second