

# WHAT SCHOOL DO WE NEED? THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL TODAY

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**Abstract.** The author discusses the current role of school as an element of the wider social system. She wonders if school is a place where students gain valuable knowledge, skills and attitudes. Recalling the model of Finnish education, the author shows a school that teaches how to explore the world and competently live in it.

**Keywords:** role of the school; Finnish educational system; values in the school

## Introduction

Questions about the role and function of education and school have been raised in both scientific and social discourse. However considering various processes such as globalization, social changes, development of technologies occurring in today's world, a lot of definitions seem to be insufficient. Even Durkheim's understanding of education as a methodical socialization of young citizens (Durkheim, 1968) coinciding with the culture of a given society, in the light of globalization and social change, has long since exhausted its relevance<sup>1</sup>. Globalization adds a new dimension to the social function of the school, which boundaries have been expanded by an increasingly multicultural and diverse society. Among the most crucial problems that European nations will face soon are:

- digitization and automation, development of artificial intelligence; technological progress;
- the future of work, its impact on working conditions and the future demand for skills;
- social inclusion and the need to share the outcome of economic growth and to reduce inequalities, including differences in the treatment of women and men;
- demographic trends, the aging of the workforce and the need to integrate a culturally diverse immigrant population;
- new communication models, social media, the phenomenon of "false information" and the need to spread media literacy throughout the society;
- growing populism and xenophobia, the risk of radicalization leading to acts of violence and the need to strengthen the sense of belonging to a community.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> see E. Durkheim, *Education and Sociology*, New York 1968, s. 30

<sup>2</sup> COM (2017) 673, p.2. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/HTML/?uri=COM:>

Challenges faced by education systems in the 21st century lead to reflection and search for answers to the questions what should be included in education curriculum, how it should be implemented, what competences the school should teach? These questions seem particularly important, especially in the light of the implementation of European policies and their aims, included in the vision of creating a European education area, which should lead to "using the full potential of education and culture as driving forces of employment, social justice and civic activity, as well as the way of to experience European identity in all its diversity."<sup>3</sup> And although in the meantime there have been many new answers as to what education should be, including the school, this question is still valid. It seems that the school as a social system has never before been subject to such diverse social, political, cultural or economic influences and changes.

### **What is the role of a contemporary school?**

In the recommendations of the Council of the European Union on key competences in the process of lifelong learning, it was stated that every citizen has the right to good quality, inclusive education and lifelong learning, so that thanks to acquired competences one can be effective both in social life and on the labor market.<sup>4</sup>

Do current education models and systems ensure the acquisition of competences considered necessary in the modern and future world? The most important role of education that many researchers mention is the role that contributes to student development. The key competences that will be crucial for participation in diverse and rapidly changing and democratic societies in adult life include social, civic and learning skills.<sup>5</sup> They will determine further learning and development.

In the light of the ubiquitous adaptive thinking and instrumentalism in school (Kocór, 2007), which is sustained by decision-makers as well as by teachers, students and parents, unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure these demands. The schools appreciate humble students who obey blindly the discipline and rigid requirements of teachers. Educational programs are not adapted either to the needs of the modern world or to the needs of students. Learning is still about memory, rigid mastery of knowledge, it is deprived of permission for critical thinking or asking creative, unusual questions.

Students spend many inefficient hours at school sitting in school benches in a system of rigidly settled time units. In addition, after classes they receive homework, which takes afternoon hours and often becomes a catching up material that could not

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[2017:673:FIN](#) Commission message to the European Parliament, Strengthening the European identity through education and culture; Contribution of the European Commission to the leaders' meeting in Gothenburg on November 17, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem

<sup>4</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/PL/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/PL/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN)

<sup>5</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.

be processed during the lesson, often due to overloaded program. The next day, students are questioned about this knowledge, which boils down to passive and schematic repetition of the same content. Scheme: "cram, pass, forget" in modern school is still valid. The school often succumbs to the ideology of dominant power that is too much favored, which is manifested, for example, in the program implemented, the selection of recommended reading materials, the way some subjects are implemented, and the organization of school events that contribute to the implementation of specific propaganda.

The learning process hardly ever involves experiencing or being involved, using modern technologies that are part and need of student everyday life. Unfortunately, school reality is far from the postulative response to the role of school given by John White, which suggests that "school should promote human happiness and well-being" (White, 2007, s. 7).

In the light of social needs, one of the fundamental functions of education is to provide equal opportunities for students from various backgrounds. Is this function fully implemented at present? Does contemporary school ensure equality, does it not only provide an opportunity to meet educational needs but also to express them? This is not just about economic inequality, understood as access to resources, which strengthens elite access to school, but as Lynch suggests, first of all, the inequality generated by the selection and admission procedures for students, procedures for dividing into groups by level of knowledge, system assessment or also curriculum development systems. According to Lynch, not only the ideas published by Bourdieu contradict this, but also her own research. Lynch confirms that formal education leads to the strengthening of class inequalities, as well as gender, disability, race, sexuality, even age, and finally to inequalities in respect and recognition at school (Lynch, 2012). The problem of unequal resources is a broader problem and from this perspective it would be worth introducing courses on social classes. Educational programs on human rights, civic or sex education are present at schools (Lynch, 2012)<sup>6</sup>. Although, in fact, European school civic or sex education plays an important role, sex education classes still have nothing to do with education in many countries. An example here is Poland, where the area of sex education is very neglected, and classes turning students' attention to all forms of discrimination and violence, including the one based on the sexual orientation, are pure fiction. Sex education is conducted as part of the optional subject "Education for family life", the classes include 14 lesson hours<sup>7</sup>, they are often correctly adapted to the schedule of other school lessons, and the program and their substantive content depends on the worldview of a teacher. According to the Ponton sex educators report, teachers are not professionally trained and prepared to teach classes. Most often they are run by "biology teachers (31%), history teachers, social studies or cultural knowledge (20%), about 16% are "family life" teachers. Religion teachers make up 12% of the

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<sup>6</sup> see also: Educational program on human rights in France, civic, social and political education courses (*Civic, Social and Political Education, CSPE*) in Ireland, Lynch, 2012

<sup>7</sup> number of hours per semester

teachers. According to the report, the educational materials used during the classes are outdated and inadequate to age, and the films presented strengthen myths and stereotypes about sexuality. In many Polish schools happened to be shown biased films presenting the process of abortion or homosexuality as a disease.<sup>8</sup> Signed by few presidents of Polish cities<sup>9</sup> declarations regarding the introduction of anti-discrimination and anti-violence education at school were criticized by the then Minister of National Education Anna Zalewska, who stated that "the card also collides essentially with the core curriculum. There is no place for such projects in schools."<sup>10</sup>

### **Finnish school - the response to challenges**

A contemporary school should take into account the challenges of the modern world related to ecology, new technologies, defense of civil rights, globalization and migration, and provide new ways of learning for society. It should play an active role in forming active and participating citizens, and also contribute to promoting equality in civic competence?

The Finnish education model is the answer to these demands. It is not about the fact that Finnish students are leading in the rankings of the International Student Assessment Program (PISA)<sup>11</sup>, but about a different understanding of what education is and what role should education have in society. One of its aims is to educate happy citizens. So how is this goal achieved in school practice?

There has been a lot written about the Finnish school. The Finns have already comprehended in the 70s that profound school reform could contribute to the development of society and its individuals (Sahlsberg, 2015). The basis of success is the value-based education model (Ulatowska, 2017). The Finnish school is a place where respect, trust, cooperation, equality and values dominate and are shared by the entire school community. These values are manifested not only in the right to equal opportunities in access to education, but also in educational policy and specific actions - lack of control in schools, teacher training, delegating decision-making powers and responsibility from central administration to local levels.

Finnish classes are usually described as student-centered, where teachers have enormous autonomy in carrying out work by being responsible for the curriculum or teaching methods. The school program is based on a multidisciplinary model, and

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<sup>8</sup> Report on what sex education in Polish schools looks like, "Ponton" Sexual Educators Group, 2009 [http://ponton.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/raport\\_jaka\\_edukacja\\_2014\\_21112014.pdf](http://ponton.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/raport_jaka_edukacja_2014_21112014.pdf)

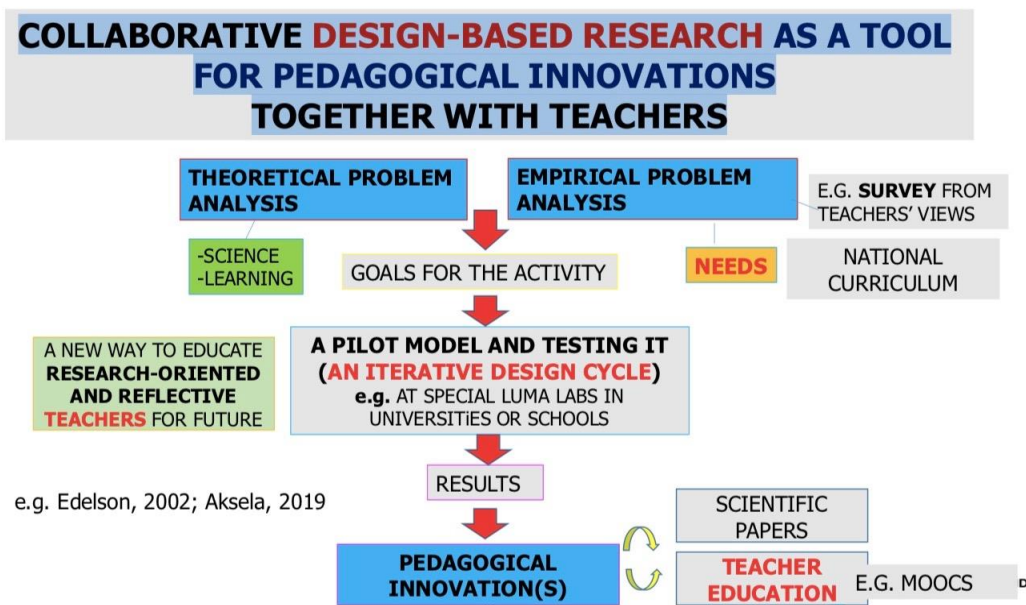
<sup>9</sup> Document „Warsaw's urban policy for the LGBT + community "- Deklaracja LGBT+” signed by Rafal Trzaskowski Warsaw's president, 2019 r.

<sup>10</sup> Polish Radio <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2268711,Anna-Zalewska-odnosnie-Deklaracji-LGBT-w-szkolach-mamy-juz-edukacje-seksualna>

<sup>11</sup> PISA tests organized every 3 years since 2000. They are the largest international skills tests of students aged 15, organized in OECD countries and selected partner countries in the field of mathematics, reading and interpretation as well as scientific reasoning; <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

students play an active role in designing their own educational activities. In lessons, specific problems are posed before students, the solution of which requires a multi-faceted approach and combining knowledge from various fields, cooperation in projects. Nationwide tests or school ranking lists are not used. Assessment of learning outcomes is of an incentive and support nature, provides information that will help in further development. The learning process is an experience process that uses innovative methods and techniques.<sup>12</sup> They also form the basis of educational success, according to the principle inscribed in the development of education - it works, let's improve it. How do they make them work?

## LUMA as an idea for pedagogical innovations



**Figure 1.** Model Collaborative design-based research as a tool for pedagogical innovations together with teachers

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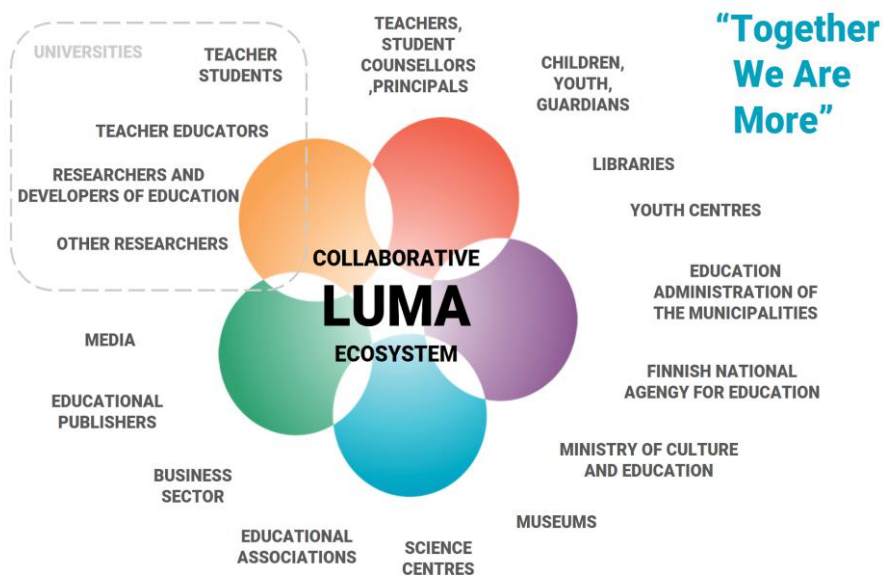
[https://istp2019.fi/documents/10810921/10916646/ISTP2019\\_UH\\_Aksela.pdf/d182721c-72c6-46b4-6230-e5c5e3266b46/ISTP2019\\_UH\\_Aksela.pdf.pdf](https://istp2019.fi/documents/10810921/10916646/ISTP2019_UH_Aksela.pdf/d182721c-72c6-46b4-6230-e5c5e3266b46/ISTP2019_UH_Aksela.pdf.pdf), 2019

Despite the high results in PISA tests achieved by Finnish students, a decline in interest in learning in the areas of science has been observed. To meet these trends, the Finnish National Board of Education decided to launch the LUMA scientific

<sup>12</sup> see [https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/finnish\\_education\\_in\\_a\\_nutshell.pdf](https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/finnish_education_in_a_nutshell.pdf)

education development program. The main goal of the project was to raise the level of Finnish education and competences of students, improve educational practices and support interest in science. The continuation of the project was followed by the opening of 13 LUMA centers at universities throughout Finland, overseen by the umbrella organization LUMA Center Finland. LUMA centers create the entire learning ecosystem, using the latest methods and activities, inspiring, motivating students to deepen their knowledge in mathematics, sciences and technology. They also support teachers in lifelong learning and professional development. Developing new pedagogical solutions and educating teachers in their implementation is a constant activity. Design-based research plays a key role in the development of pedagogical innovations, which allows the creation of new solutions in the field of learning environment, methods and teaching materials. Then they are used in university teaching, teacher training or in science centers. Model of Collaborative design-based research is shown in Figure. 1.

LUMA's success has been achieved thanks to the involvement and cooperation of many entities - organizations, universities, companies, researchers, scientists and teachers representing various fields, experts in modern technologies, but also parents in accordance with the principle "Together we are more" (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Collaborative Ecosystem LUMA

Source: <https://www.luma.fi/en/centre/>, 2019

## Summary

Education and the tasks it faces play a key role in the modern world and therefore require a holistic approach and consideration of the impact of various factors. The education model adopted and constantly developed in Finland seems to meet the demands of modern times. The education system, in which there is space for introducing changes, modifications, innovations, can be sources of inspiration for other education systems and their creators. The values present in Finnish education contribute to constant reflection, cooperation, asking questions and creating inclusive education that works for equality and helps shape competences for the future. The whole system is inclusive for the society and translates into the education of active, responsible and committed citizens.

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