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Zabudnutá väčšina: Prečo tradičné hodnotenie zlyháva v inkluzívnych triedach

The Forgotten Majority: Why Traditional Grading Fails in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

This article explores the relevance and fairness of traditional grading systems in Polish primary education, particularly in classes 4–8. While early education (classes 1–3) employs descriptive, developmental assessment aligned with each child's individual progress, older students are subjected to rigid numerical grading (scale 1–6), a model increasingly disconnected from the realities of today's inclusive education. Since the introduction of inclusive schooling, a significant proportion of students are assessed under individualized criteria often based on psychological and pedagogical documentation. However, the same grading scale continues to be applied universally, creating a system in which fairness and comparability are nearly impossible to maintain. Ironically, the greatest disadvantage falls on students without formal diagnoses or learning requirements. Moreover, the article argues that numerical grading no longer serves a meaningful purpose in the broader educational journey. Contemporary secondary schools, in most cases, admit all students regardless of grades. Practices such as repeating a year have nearly disappeared, replaced by preventive and supportive programs aimed at helping struggling students in real time. The article calls for a critical re-evaluation of the role of grades in classes 4–8, advocating for alternative assessment strategies that reflect students' learning processes, competencies, and growth. It also questions the psychological impact of rigid grading on motivation, especially among pupils who fall outside of both the "special needs" and "gifted" categories. The current system, inherited from a different era, may no longer fit the inclusive, flexible, and supportive model Polish education claims to embrace.

Keywords: Grading system. Inclusive education. Primary school assessment. Individualization. Educational policy.

Inclusive education in Poland – an overview

Since the 2019 Ministerial Regulation on assessment, classification, and promotion of students in Polish schools, pupils in classes 4–8 are evaluated on a rigid numerical scale from 1 (the lowest) to 6 (the highest). In contrast,

children in classes 1–3 receive descriptive assessments reflecting developmental progress[1]. This duality stems from policy recognition of early childhood needs and is further specified and detailed in Journal of Laws No. 83, item 562 Regulation of the Minister of National Education, 30 April 2007, regarding the conditions and methods of assessing, classifying, and promoting pupils, as well as administering tests and examinations in public schools.

According to the Office for National Statistics data in Poland (GUS) in the 2024/25 school year in Poland, 3.2 million pupils attended 14.0 thousand primary schools for children and adolescents (205.7 thousand more than in the previous school year).[2] With an average class size of 15–18 students, inclusive education has become a standard practice in Polish schools nowadays (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the conditions for the provision of education and care to children and young people who are disabled, socially maladjusted or at risk of social maladjustment)[3].

Table below presents statistical data taken from the Office of National Statistics in Poland (GUS) in regards to number of children with different disabilities attending primary education in Poland in 2023/24.

Tab. 1. Authors own table, statistical data taken from GUS (Central Statistical Office in Poland)

School year	**2023/24[4]**
Deaf	514
Hearing impaired	6006
Blind	22
Vision impaired	4612
With intellectual disability (light/moderate/severe)	24219
With autism/Asperger syndrome	48041
With impaired motor skills, aphasia	19890
With multiple disabilities	16024
Socially maladjusted	41
At risk of social maladjustment	7027
No of pupils (total)	**126396**

As presented in Table 1, the largest group of primary school students holding official psychological and pedagogical reports are those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger syndrome (48,041 students). The second largest category comprises students with intellectual disabilities (light, moderate, or severe), numbering 24,219, who are also placed within

[1] Journal of Laws No. 83, item 562, § 13.3. "In grades I–III of primary school, mid-year and end-of-year classification grades in educational activities shall be descriptive assessments."
[2] GUS, 2025a.
[3] Eurydice, 2025b.
[4] GUS, 2025b.

inclusive education settings. The third group consists of students with motor impairments and aphasia (19,890), followed by a considerable number of students diagnosed with multiple disabilities (16,024). All of these students have been formally assessed by specialists and issued official documentation, which must be taken into account when determining assessment and grading criteria. Overall, in the 2023/2024 school year, a total of 126,396 pupils were identified as requiring special educational support. This necessitates differentiated instructional approaches from teachers, as well as the application of adjusted assessment and grading practices.

According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education in Poland (April 30, 2007, as amended: Journal of Laws No. 83, item 562; and 2013, item 520), on the conditions and methods of assessing, classifying, and promoting students and conducting exams in public schools, the teacher is obliged to adjust the educational requirements referred to in §4(1)(1) to the individual developmental and educational needs as well as the psychophysical capabilities of the student:

- who holds a statement of special education needs issued by a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre,
- who holds a statement of the need for individual teaching,
- who holds an opinion from a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre,
- who does not hold any of the above-mentioned documents, but is receiving psychological and pedagogical support at school, based on the individual assessment of developmental and educational needs and psychophysical capabilities conducted by teachers and specialists, as set out in the provisions on psychological and pedagogical support in public preschools, schools, and educational institutions (Journal of Laws 2013, item 532).[5]

The table below presents requirements in regards to testing and assessment for pupils with different educational needs in Poland.

[5] ORE, 2025.

Tab.2. Reported learning difficulties in Polish schools

Student diagnosis	**Required Accommodations in Testing and Assessment**
Developmental Dyslexia	Extended time for tests, fewer tasks, multiple-choice or gap-filling formats, oral answers preferred, teacher checks understanding of written instructions.
Dysgraphia (illegible handwriting)	Use of a computer or printed letters allowed, student may be assessed orally if handwriting is unreadable, aesthetic quality of handwriting is not graded.
Dysorthographia (severe spelling issues)	Separate grading for content and spelling; spelling component may be omitted from formal grade reports.
Mild Intellectual Disability	Simplified and reduced number of questions, extended time (up to +50%), possible use of assistant or separate room.
Moderate or Severe Intellectual Disability	Individualized curriculum (IEP), descriptive assessment only, adapted teaching content and methods.
ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)	Tests broken into smaller sections, extended time, separate room or reduced-distraction environment, verbal instructions reinforced in writing, shortened tasks.
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Option to answer in writing to avoid stress from oral tasks (or the reverse), use of visual supports and scaffolding, additional time, reduced sensory overload in the testing environment, clearly structured assessment formats.
Chronic Illness (e.g., epilepsy, asthma, juvenile arthritis)	Breaks during testing, option for remote or home-based evaluation if necessary, adapted physical expectations in performance tasks, consideration of fatigue and treatment effects, flexible deadlines and test schedules.

While the same 1–6 grading scale continues to be employed in regards to all pupils, the performance requirements are systematically adjusted to reflect the individual learner's needs. However, this leaves the **'**average' students, those without official medical or psychological requirements, in a double bind. They are measured by uniform standards yet lack the targeted support of peers with official diagnoses.

Grading system analysis

In this article, it is argued that the 1–6 grading system in classes 4–8 has outlived its usefulness. It disadvantages the median learner, disconnects from current inclusive and supportive practice, and fails to align with educational outcomes. The problem is that the same tool, namely 1–6 grading system, is applied in grading different 'types' of students. Since inclusive education means having different aptitudes students attending the same classroom, and having individualised form of instruction the traditional

grading method should be replaced, modified or simply abolished. The idea of grading meant to serve the purpose of differentiating students' knowledge, or in the case of grade 1 (F) indicate there lack of. If one considers grade 2, it is a minimum to pass to the next year. Obtaining 1 (F) at the end of the school year means that the student has to retake a whole year again, however this happens less frequent every year in Poland due to preventive and supportive programs (GOV.PL, 2025) to help struggling pupils early rather than leave them behind. It is a common practice in some countries e.g. Portugal, Spain, France and Belgium, an exceptional practice in a few e.g. Finland, Poland, Greece and in others grade retention is not an option e.g. Norway, Island, United Kingdom. (González-Betancor and López-Puig, 2016). As stated by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2024: "Grade repetition is common in many countries to give students more time to master the content of a grade, although its effectiveness is debated. In Poland, 0.9% of primary and 1.2% of lower secondary students repeat a grade in their current level of education, while the OECD average is 1.5% at primary, 2.2% at lower secondary and 3.2% at general upper secondary level." (OECD, 2024). Therefore, the relevance of the grade 1 (F) becomes questionable if no student is ultimately retained and a minimum passing grade of 2 is granted to ensure promotion to the next class. Moreover, final primary school grades carry minimal weight: nearly all students advance to secondary school regardless of their grades these days[6], which undermines the functional purpose of numerical scoring. This raises urgent questions: if numerical grades no longer serve their original roles, why do they persist?

A critical issue in the current system of summative assessment is the lack of transparency in how grades are assigned, particularly within the framework of inclusive education. In Polish schools, the grading system is, in principle, transparent: teachers are obliged to present pupils with the assessment criteria at the beginning of the school year, thereby ensuring that students are aware of what is expected of them for each grade. The "lack of transparency" stated above does not concern the general grading framework, but rather the individual adjustments made for students with diagnosed disabilities or learning difficulties. Due to data protection regulations (RODO) and the sensitive nature of such information, these adaptations are not openly discussed in the classroom, which may create the impression of non-uniform or unclear grading practices. For instance, in a classroom of fifteen students (Europe and Northern America have the lowest PTTR, with an average of 16 pupils per trained teacher in 2022)[7], it is not uncommon for nearly half to be assessed according to adjusted criteria due to diagnosed learning difficulties

[6] Historically, the average for Poland from 1971 to 2022 is 94.37 percent. The minimum value, 74.3 percent, was reached in 1971 while the maximum of 112.58 percent was recorded in 2020. (The Global Economy, 2025).
[7] UNESCO, 2024.

or special educational needs. While one student may receive a grade of 5 (very good) based on the completion of a full exam within 45 minutes, another may be awarded the same grade after completing a simplified version of the test, with extended time, fewer tasks, and adjustments such as disregarding spelling, punctuation, or handwriting legibility. Despite these substantial differences in assessment conditions and expectations, the final numerical grade appears identical in the gradebook, with no visible distinction regarding the mode of assessment or adaptations applied. Furthermore, students are not classified or labelled (nor should they be) as having received a "modified 5," which makes it difficult to interpret the true level of academic mastery represented by the grade. This raises a fundamental question: to what extent do numerical grades reflect the actual knowledge? This article does not aim to question or diminish the abilities of students with diagnosed learning difficulties. Rather, it seeks to highlight an often overlooked consequence of the current grading system in inclusive classrooms. Consider the case of an average student[8] who completes a full, unmodified test under standard conditions and receives a grade of 4 (good), while a peer with an official diagnosis, working under adjusted criteria (extended time, reduced task load, leniency regarding spelling or handwriting), is awarded a grade of 5 (very good). From the perspective of the grading register, which records only the final numerical outcome, the second student appears to have achieved a higher level of mastery. However, this numerical equivalence masks the fundamentally different paths taken to reach these results.

Therefore, does a grade of 5 earned under adapted conditions truly indicate a higher level of knowledge or skill than a grade of 4 earned without accommodations? Looking at the register, the answer appears to be yes, yet in practical, pedagogical, and ethical terms, the comparison is far more complex. This discrepancy can create a sense of inequity, particularly among students without reported disabilities who are assessed strictly against the full academic standard without additional support. The purpose here is not to challenge the necessity or fairness of accommodations which are essential and legally mandated but rather to encourage a broader reflection on how grades are interpreted, what they actually represent, and who benefits or loses under this system. Without proper contextualisation, grading becomes an ambiguous and potentially misleading measure of achievement, disadvantaging both the high-performing and the unsupported average student. As Black and Wiliam (1998) argue in their seminal work on formative assessment, effective evaluation must be both valid and fair, providing an accurate reflection of what a student knows and can do, while also ensuring comparability across learners. When summative grades are detached from the conditions under which they were earned, including individualized accommodations, the assessment may lose construct validity, that is, its ability to measure what it

[8] In here the 'average students' refers to a pupil without reported disabilities.

claims to measure. In inclusive classrooms, the uniform numerical grade obscures the differentiated nature of the assessment, potentially distorting both internal and external interpretations of student achievement. Without sufficient contextualisation or supplementary descriptors, grades cease to inform (teachers, parents, and future educators) of the learner's actual performance level, which undermines the core purpose of assessment: to support learning and guide pedagogical decisions.

As stipulated in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education (Rozporządzenie MEN z dnia 30 kwietnia 2007 r. z późn. zm.), teachers are legally required to "adjust educational requirements to the individual developmental and educational needs and psychophysical capabilities of the student" (§6.1a). This framework reflects the ethos of inclusive education, aiming to ensure equity by acknowledging diverse learning profiles and removing systemic barriers. However, the regulation does not address how the visibility or interpretation of the grade should reflect these accommodations, leaving room for misunderstanding in evaluating student performance.

Similar concerns have been raised by scholars such as Tomlinson (2014), who notes that inclusive education should aim not only to provide access and encourage participation, but also to ensure that all students are evaluated in a fair and equitable manner. The lack of transparency in how grades are achieved may compromise both pedagogical integrity and student motivation. It is important to note that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR / RODO)[9], teachers are legally prohibited from publicly disclosing a student's individual educational diagnosis, special needs status, or the nature of any accommodations provided. Consequently, statements such as "this student received a higher grade due to modified assessment methods" or references to "having papers" (documentation of learning difficulties) cannot be made in front of the class. This creates a dilemma: teachers are unable to explain to the group why a student received a different version of a test or why their grade appears disproportionately high, despite observable differences in the assessment process.

In practice, this lack of transparency may lead to misunderstandings and resentment among peers, especially in classroom environments. Students often sense these discrepancies and may voice them informally through comments or comparisons, which can undermine classroom cohesion and negatively impact social dynamics. While the legal framework rightly protects individual privacy and dignity, it may unintentionally foster tension or a sense of unfairness among classmates, particularly when accommodations result in visible academic advantages. As Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue, inclusive education must be more than physical presence; it must ensure meaningful and equitable learning experiences, including how achievement is assessed and represented.

[9] DATUREX GmbH, 2024.

Teachers', students' and parents' perspective to grading system

Despite the growing complexity of inclusive education, no substantial changes have been made to the existing grading system in Poland primarily because there appears to be no formal objection from concerned parties. In practice, students with documented learning difficulties benefit from modified assessment conditions and frequently achieve high grades with reduced workloads. From their perspective, the system works well: they receive positive academic outcomes under less pressure. Their parents are similarly satisfied, as their children bring home strong grades and experience fewer learning-related frustrations.

Meanwhile, average or high-achieving students, those without educational statements, rarely voice dissatisfaction, even though their needs may be overlooked. As teachers focus their attention on students requiring individualized support, the curriculum and pace are often adjusted downward. Consequently, students without diagnosed learning difficulties tend to work more independently. Their learning may be under challenged, but as long as their grades remain high, they (and their parents) are unlikely to raise concerns.

Teachers themselves, aware that they have limited influence over systemic reforms to the grading policy, often choose to adapt quietly. Assigning the lowest grade (1) may trigger administrative complications or require justification; giving the highest grade (6) may be problematic due to the lack of unified national grading standards. As a result, many educators operate within a narrow, pragmatic range of marking, minimizing friction rather than initiating change.

While replacing numerical grades with descriptive assessment could offer a more accurate and individualized understanding of student learning, it presents significant challenges. In large classes, with diverse learners and broad curricular content, it is difficult to provide detailed, formative feedback for every student. Precise knowledge evaluation requires analysing not only what a student has mastered, but also where they fall behind and such thorough assessment is time-consuming and administratively demanding.

Introducing an alternative grading scale for students with formal accommodations (e.g., a parallel scale such as 1a–6a) may seem a logical step. However, this raises ethical and social concerns. Would such differentiation stigmatize or isolate students with special needs? Would parents accept a system in which their child is clearly marked as being evaluated by a different standard? The risk of unintentional exclusion is significant, even if the goal is greater transparency. Ultimately, even though 'typical' students may not complain, the system risks becoming fundamentally imbalanced. Grades no longer reflect equivalent levels of knowledge or effort. The current grading structure, in trying to serve everyone, may in fact serve no one fully or fairly.

Conclusion

The 21st century has brought significant transformations to the field of education, reshaping not only pedagogical approaches but also the broader philosophy underpinning classroom practice. The rise of inclusive education, the growing emphasis on early identification of students' learning difficulties, the incorporation of artificial intelligence in teaching, the expansion of STEM education, and the increasing availability of psychological and pedagogical support have all contributed to a more responsive, student-centred model of schooling. These developments reflect a system that aspires to adapt to the diverse needs, abilities, and potentials of all learners.

Yet, amidst these progressive shifts, one element has remained largely unchanged: the grading system. Although its form has evolved slightly, from the traditional 2–5 scale to today's 1–6 range, the philosophy behind it has not kept pace with contemporary educational values. As noted earlier, the lowest (1) and the highest (6) grades are often avoided in practice, effectively narrowing the scale in a system that is already set. This persistence of a uniform numerical grading model stands in stark contrast to the broader educational narrative, which promotes individualisation, differentiation, and flexibility.

If every student is now meant to be treated in an individual way, with instruction, support, and expectations tailored to their unique profile, how can a single, standardised grading scale continue to serve as the primary means of academic evaluation? The contradiction is clear: the push toward personalisation in education is undermined by a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment. Unless the grading system itself is reimagined to reflect the diversity of learners and the complexity of learning, it risks becoming an outdated relic in an otherwise modern and inclusive educational landscape.

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