



A Comparative Analysis of Educational Justice with Emphasis on Role of Teachers in the Educational Systems of Iran, Sweden and Finland

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 14 December 2025 Revised: 20 April 2025 Accepted: 06 May 2025 Online: 07 June 2026	This study aims to explain the similarities and differences in the role of teachers in achieving educational justice within the educational systems of Iran, Sweden, and Finland. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative design with a comparative-analytical approach. The findings indicate that in Iran, within the context of a highly centralized governance structure and a standardized national curriculum, educational justice is largely limited to ensuring minimum literacy standards and implementing compensatory interventions, while teachers primarily function as implementers of centralized programs. In Sweden, within a semi-decentralized structure and a welfare-state framework, educational justice is defined with an emphasis on equality of opportunity, and teachers act as accountable professionals who regulate educational gaps. In Finland, supported by a culture of institutional trust and research-based teacher education, educational justice assumes a preventive nature, and teachers - acting as designers of equitable learning - play a central role, with broad professional autonomy, in structurally eliminating educational inequality and achieving universal literacy. The results indicate a significant relationship between the degree of governance centralization, teachers' professional autonomy, and the depth of the realization of educational justice.
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1. Introduction

Educational justice is one of the fundamental concepts in contemporary philosophy of education. In recent approaches, it goes beyond apparent equality in access to education and emphasizes the quality of learning experiences, attention to learners' individual differences, and the protection of their human dignity. From this perspective, educational justice is not a static or merely distributive concept, rather, it is a multidimensional, situational and relational phenomenon that is realized within the context of actual classroom practices and through teachers' professional judgment (Fraser, 2008). Therefore, educational justice is less the product of macro-level policymaking than a process constructed through everyday educational interactions.

Despite the strong emphasis placed on educational justice in major policy documents across different educational systems, recent research indicates a significant gap between "justice as stated in policy" and "justice as experienced in the classroom." Recent reports by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that one of the most important factors in reducing educational inequalities in countries such as Finland is the professional quality and level of autonomy of teachers (OECD, 2023). These reports explicitly state that justice-oriented policies are effective only when teachers are granted authority, institutional trust, and opportunities for professional judgment. In Iran's educational system, however, educational justice is primarily pursued at the macro-policy level through centralized curricula and administrative mechanisms. Although this structure-oriented approach pays attention to formal equality, it is often unable to account for the complexities of educational situations, students' individual differences, and the ethical demands of classroom decision-making (Safi, 2020). As a result, educational justice is reduced to a set of rules and directives, weakening its realization in actual educational practice.

In this regard, the teacher, as the principal actor in the teaching-learning process, plays a decisive role in either realizing or failing to realize educational justice. Contemporary studies show that even the most comprehensive justice-oriented policies remain at the level of discourse and do not lead to equitable educational action if the teacher is regarded merely as an implementer of predetermined programs (Biesta, 2022). UNESCO has also emphasized in its recent reports that educational justice is rooted less in formal structures than in the quality of teacher-student interactions, attention to individual differences, and flexibility in the teaching-learning process (UNESCO, 2020). Based on this analysis, educational systems that create greater space for trust, discretion, and autonomy for teachers tend to be more successful in achieving inclusive and equitable education.

Despite these findings, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. Most studies have either examined only a single educational system or focused solely on macro-level policies of educational justice. So far, few studies have analytically and comparatively investigated the professional status, degree of autonomy, educational authority, and ethical-pedagogical mission of teachers across the three distinct contexts of Iran, Sweden, and Finland. Over the past few decades, numerous studies have examined educational justice in different countries from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Some important findings from these studies are as follows:

- Usmadi & Ergusni (2025) showed that Finland's emphasis on student-centered learning and educational justice constitutes a key mechanism for strengthening equal access to high-quality learning and supporting diverse students.
- An OECD report (2024) indicates that Sweden's educational policies, centered on universal access and compensatory support, play an important role in advancing educational justice and reducing educational inequalities.
- Holmberg et al. (2021) found that teachers' professional autonomy in Finnish schools has strengthened their ability to respond to students' diverse needs.
- A comparative OECD report (2023) on the role of teacher quality in reducing educational inequalities in developed countries showed that professional support for teachers is a key factor in achieving educational justice.
- A global UNESCO report (2023), emphasizing the role of teachers in the realization of equitable and inclusive education, showed that the quality of teacher-student interaction is the primary factor in educational justice.

In Iran as well, recent research findings indicate that structural challenges and centralization in educational planning have limited teachers' discretion and hindered the realization of educational justice. For example:

- Asgari et al. (2025), in examining the relationship between justice in teachers' behavior, found that teachers' behavior has a significant relationship with students' academic motivation and self-efficacy and can contribute to improving their educational experience.
- Rostami and Alijan (2024), in studying the role of teachers in implementing justice-oriented curricula, showed that attention to students' individual needs can enhance both learning quality and educational justice.

- Mohammadi (2022), in examining barriers to the realization of educational justice in Iran's educational system, identified the lack of teachers' professional autonomy as one of the main challenges to educational justice.
- Ghasemi (2021) showed that teachers' instructional methods can reduce educational inequalities.

Despite these findings, there remains a notable research gap in analyzing the similarities and differences among these systems regarding the teacher's professional status, their degree of autonomy, and the nature of their ethical-educational agency in achieving educational equity. This gap highlights the necessity for a comparative study that moves beyond the mere description of policies to deeply analyze educational experiences and the role of teachers in diverse contexts. Accordingly, the research question of the current research is stated as follows: Why, despite the common emphasis in official educational documents on educational justice, are the models for realizing this concept so different in teachers' actual practices and class experiences across these countries - specifically Iran, Sweden, and Finland? For this reason, this study aims to examine, through a comparative approach, the roots of these disparities in how the role, status, authority, and educational mission of the teacher are defined and institutionalized within each educational system. Hence, the main research question is as follows:

- What similarities and differences exist in the role of teachers in achieving educational justice within the educational systems of Iran, Sweden, and Finland?

The novelty of this study lies in the fact that, unlike most previous studies which have focused solely on macro-level policies of educational justice or on the role of teachers within a single country, this research adopts a comparative and analytical approach and examines the professional and ethical position of teachers as the main mediating variable in the realization of educational justice across three different cultural-institutional contexts. By focusing on the ways in which professional autonomy is institutionalized, the nature of institutional trust placed in teachers, their educational authority, and the role of their ethical judgment in Iran, Sweden, and Finland, this study proposes a new framework demonstrating that educational justice is not merely the outcome of policies but rather the product of the quality of teachers' professional action and judgment. This perspective can provide inspiration for revising justice-oriented educational policies in Iran and

similar contexts and helps explain the gap between justice in policy documents and justice in practice.

2. Research Method

The present study is qualitative in nature and adopts a comparative–analytical approach. Data were collected through documentary sources, and the comparative analysis was conducted based on Bereday’s four-stage model, which includes description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison (Noah & Eckstein, 2020). Scientific documents and literature were retrieved through searches in international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, as well as Iranian databases including SID, Magiran, and Iran Doc. In addition, upstream policy documents and official reports from the websites of reputable international organizations such as OECD and UNESCO, along with official documents from the ministries of education of the selected countries, were examined. To enhance the credibility of the findings, strategies such as data source triangulation and repeated reviews of coding within a unified conceptual framework were employed.

3. Findings

Stage One: Description

Iran

In Iran, the concept of educational justice has a long history in policy documents and national development programs. However, it is important to examine what image of educational justice these documents present and, more importantly, what actually occurs in practice and how the role of teachers is explained within this structure.

In the policy literature of Iran’s education system, documents such as the Fundamental Transformation Document of Education (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011), the Vision Document 2025 (Expediency Discernment Assembly, 2005), and the Five-Year Development Plans (Plan and Budget Organization, 2017) all emphasize the realization of educational justice and consider it one of the main pillars of national progress. Providing equal access to high-quality learning opportunities for all students, reducing class and regional disparities, and strengthening teachers’ professional capacity are among the explicit objectives of these documents. Nevertheless, these documents mainly determine macro-level orientations and rarely address the realities of

schools and classrooms. Consequently, a significant gap has emerged between “approved policy” and “educational practice,” a gap that has also been confirmed by national studies.

The Research Center of the Iranian Parliament, in its analytical report of 2022, stated that many of the goals related to educational justice have not been realized at the school level because macro policies are often designed without sufficient attention to everyday operational challenges (Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2023). The report explains that excessive centralization in educational management, the lack of an effective professional development system for teachers, and insufficient specialized support in disadvantaged schools are among the most important factors limiting the realization of educational justice. In other words, while upstream policy documents promise “justice,” teachers in practice are often left without sufficient resources, authority or support.

In 2023, another report by the Parliamentary Research Center indicated that educational inequalities in the country are not solely the result of economic poverty or geographical distance, but are more strongly related to the quality of teaching and the stability of the teaching workforce. In areas where teacher turnover is high or where fewer specialized teachers are present, students’ learning outcomes in primary education show a significant decline. These findings are also consistent with analyses of basic skills data (reading and mathematics), indicating that educational justice in Iran remains vulnerable at the level of quality (Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2023).

The important point is that even though policy documents refer to school-centered management and the professional development of teachers, recent university academic studies show that teachers’ actual autonomy in selecting teaching methods, managing classrooms, designing compensatory activities, or creating equal learning opportunities is very limited. Besides, the structural centralization of the education system has prevented teachers from adjusting their instructional practices according to students’ real needs. This limitation has become one of the factors contributing to the reproduction of educational inequalities within classrooms (Mousavi, 2021).

On the other hand, official national statistics also present a concerning picture of inequality. The school dropout rate in rural areas remains higher than in urban areas (Ministry of Education, 2022), and according to reports from the Statistical Center of Iran, the distribution of educational quality among provinces is highly uneven (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022). This disparity is also consistent with UNESCO data as well, in its 2023 report, UNESCO emphasized that Iran still requires improvement in indicators related to qualitative educational equity (UNESCO, 2023). These

findings suggest that educational justice in Iran is no longer merely a matter of access to schooling, but increasingly a matter of equity in learning experiences and equal opportunities for success.

In summary, educational justice in Iran has been strongly emphasized at the policy level; however, in practice, the actions and professional judgment of teachers play a more decisive role in determining the quality and equality of educational opportunities. Teachers stand on the frontline of either the realization or the failure of educational justice. Therefore, explaining the role of teachers in achieving educational justice - as pursued in the present study - addresses one of the fundamental gaps in Iran's education system, a gap that has been discussed theoretically in policy documents but has received less attention at the operational level. Furthermore, the Strategic Human Resources Document of the Ministry of Education identifies four key roles for teachers in achieving educational justice:

- Identifying and supporting students at risk of educational deprivation
- Employing diverse teaching methods appropriate to students' individual differences
- Ensuring fairness in assessment processes
- Active participation in school programs aimed at reducing achievement gaps (Ministry of Education, 2022)

According to data from the Statistical Center of Iran and the Ministry of Education, the country's student population is approximately 15.3 million, of which 49% are girls and 51% are boys. Among them, about 8 million students are studying in primary education, 3.6 million in lower secondary education, and 3.2 million in upper secondary education. Over the past five years, school enrollment coverage in rural areas has decreased by about 1.8% (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022). Moreover, the literacy rate among the population aged 15 and above is estimated at approximately 89–90%, according to UNESCO and national statistics. This rate is reported to be 92% for men and 86% for women (UNESCO, 2023). The provinces of Tehran and Yazd, with literacy rates exceeding 95%, have the highest rates, while Sistan and Baluchestan, with about 76%, has the lowest. The dropout rate in lower secondary education reached approximately 3.8% in 2023 (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022).

Sweden

The Swedish education system, like many Nordic countries, conceptualizes educational justice within a structural relationship that combines institutional trust in teachers, professional

autonomy, and teachers' ethical responsibility. Teachers in Sweden enjoy considerable authority in interpreting the national curriculum and adapting it to the diverse needs of students, and they play a decisive role in realizing justice at the classroom level (Lundahl, 2016). Recent studies confirm this pattern, indicating that since 2020 teachers' professional autonomy has even been strengthened, and "autonomy-driven equity" has become one of the central pillars of Swedish educational policy (Lundström & Holm, 2011; Eklöf et al., 2022).

In official documents of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), educational justice is defined as *ensuring equal opportunities for high-quality learning for all students regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or migration status* (Skolverket, 2022). This perspective is reiterated in the 2024 National Education Quality Review, which emphasizes the principle of "justice through differentiated teaching" (Skolverket, 2023). In addition, the Compensatory Education policy, initially introduced in 2019, was revised and strengthened in 2021 and 2023 (Skolverket Report, 2022).

A large-scale study by the Nordic Educational Research Center (Nordic ERC) also shows that between 2020 and 2024 the role of teachers in equity governance has increased; that is, teachers are recognized not merely as curriculum implementers but also as designers of justice-oriented decisions at the school level (Hansen, 2017). A 2025 study from Uppsala University reports that schools with teachers with high levels of professional autonomy demonstrate 32% more equitable performance in supporting immigrant students compared with schools where teachers have less autonomy (Carlgren et al., 2006). Overall, these studies present an updated picture indicating that educational justice in Sweden is not designed solely at the policy level but is largely produced in classrooms through teachers' professional practice. Key Dimensions of the Teacher's Role in Educational Justice.

- *Professional autonomy in selecting teaching methods*

Swedish teachers have the authority to adapt content, scheduling, and instructional strategies based on the National Curriculum Guidelines. Research conducted after 2020 indicates that this professional autonomy is directly associated with reducing the performance gap between immigrant and native students (Eklöf et al., 2022).

- *Support for immigrant students*

According to Swedish national law, teachers are responsible for designing and implementing compensatory programs and reception classes for immigrant students. In recent years, the

academic progress of these students has been closely linked to the quality of programs designed by teachers (Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, 2010).

- *Fair assessment practices*

Student assessment in Sweden is criterion-referenced and individualized, rather than based on comparison among students. This policy, implemented since 2011, has strengthened the role of schools and teachers in promoting fairness in assessment (Wikström, 2020).

- *Participation in decision-making*

Since 2020, the system of Collaborative School Development has been formally implemented. Under this policy, teachers participate in analyzing educational data and planning school-level strategies aimed at promoting educational equity (Skolverket, 2022; 2023).

- *Institutional trust*

According to an OECD report, 76% of Swedish teachers believe that the government and school leaders trust their professional judgment (OECD, 2024). Studies published in 2024 also indicate that such institutional trust plays a significant role in increasing the effectiveness of equity-oriented programs (Holm, 2024). According to annual Skolverket reports, the total number of students in Sweden is approximately 1.2 million, of whom 49.4% are girls and 50.6% are boys. Around 800,000 students are enrolled in primary education (Grundskola) and about 400,000 in upper secondary education (Gymnasieskola). In 2023, approximately 21% of students had a migration background, which has become one of the central issues in the country's educational equity policies (OECD, 2023). The adult literacy rate in Sweden is close to 100%, and illiteracy is largely limited to small groups of newly arrived immigrants (OECD, 2023). Moreover, PISA reports indicate that the performance gap between immigrant and native students is approximately 50 points, and reducing this gap has become a major objective of contemporary educational equity policies (OECD, 2023).

Finland

In Finland's education system, teacher professionalism and the ethical status of teachers are defined as fundamental pillars of the educational structure. Educational justice in this context is not merely an administrative or structural matter; rather, it is regarded as part of the teacher's

professional responsibility and ethical judgment, which scholars consider one of the most important factors behind Finland's success in educational equity (Niemi, 2022; Sahlberg, 2021).

Unlike some educational systems that interpret justice primarily through policies and institutional structures, in Finland educational justice begins at the school level and within the everyday interactions between teachers and students. Recent studies confirm that a professional culture grounded in trust in teachers is one of the key factors sustaining educational equity in the country (OECD, 2023).

In the official documents of the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNBE), educational justice is defined as *ensuring meaningful and high-quality learning for all students, with emphasis on individualized learning design, responsiveness to individual differences, and early intervention* (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021). The policy document "Equity in Learning Pathways" also identifies reducing performance gap between urban and rural schools and ensuring equal learning opportunities as major issues of educational equity (FNBE, 2022). Recent analyses show that Finnish education policies over the past decade have focused on strengthening equity through student-centered learning and multi-level educational support systems (OECD, 2023; Sahlberg, 2021).

Policy documents issued by the FNBE describe teachers as "designers of equitable learning" and "analysts of educational equity." Teachers are expected to adapt curricula according to students' individual characteristics, continuously assess their progress, and prevent the emergence of educational inequalities through early interventions. International research also shows that educational justice in Finland is supported more than anything else by the high quality of teacher education and a strong culture of institutional trust in teachers (Sahlberg, 2021; OECD, 2023). Analysis of Finnish education policies indicates that the teacher's role in achieving educational justice is built around several key dimensions:

❖ *Professional autonomy and ethical judgment in learning design*

Finnish teachers have the authority to redesign learning content, teaching methods, and learning pathways within the framework of the National Core Curriculum. This professional autonomy is closely linked to an ethical responsibility to ensure educational equity, enabling teachers' instructional decisions directly contribute to reducing learning inequalities (Sahlberg, 2021; Niemi, 2022).

❖ *Inclusive education and the three-tier support system*

According to the policy document “Support for Learning,” teachers are responsible for implementing three levels of educational support - general support, intensified support, and special support - to respond to diverse student needs. Each level of support begins with teacher identification and assessment, making teachers the primary agents in preventing educational inequalities. FNBE statistics show that about 35% of students receive intensified support at least once during their schooling (FNBE, 2022). Recent studies also indicate that this multi-tiered support model plays a crucial role in reducing learning gaps among students (OECD, 2023).

❖ *Early intervention and prevention of achievement gap*

One of the fundamental principles of the Finnish education system is the early identification of learning difficulties and timely intervention. According to recent OECD reports, a significant proportion of support programs and educational interventions are designed and implemented by teachers themselves, further strengthening the teacher’s role in achieving educational justice (OECD, 2023).

❖ *Institutional trust and the social status of teachers*

A distinctive feature of Finland’s education system is the high level of trust that both society and the government place in teachers. Minimal administrative supervision and broad professional autonomy allow teachers to focus primarily on students’ learning and responding to individual differences, rather than on administrative and bureaucratic reporting requirements (OECD, 2023; Sahlberg, 2021).

❖ *Collaboration with families and communities as part of educational equity*

According to the policy document “Cooperation with Homes,” teachers are expected to maintain continuous and effective communication with families to jointly guide students’ learning pathways. This cooperation between schools and families is considered an important mechanism for reducing educational disparities in Finland’s education system (Spernes, 2023).

Overall, educational justice in Finland is not simply the result of top-down structures but rather the outcome of teacher professionalism and institutional trust. Finnish teachers, as designers of learning, analysts of educational equity, implementers of early interventions, and ethical decision-makers in educational situations, are regarded as the central agents in achieving justice in schools. In the Scandinavian educational literature, this approach is often described as “the teacher

as the creator of educational justice,” a perspective that has made Finland one of the most successful educational systems in the world in terms of educational equity (Sahlberg, 2021). According to FNBE reports, the total number of students in Finland is approximately 560,000, of whom 48.7% are girls and 51.3% are boys. Among them, around 370,000 students are enrolled in basic education, and approximately 160,000 attend upper secondary education. Over the past decade, Finland’s student population has decreased by about 10%, which has become one of the challenges related to educational equity in sparsely populated regions (FNBE, 2023). Finland also maintains one of the highest literacy rates in the world in a way that according to UNESCO reports, the adult literacy rate is close to 100%, and structural illiteracy has not been reported in the country (UNESCO, 2023).

Stage Two: Interpretation

Iran

Explaining the current state of educational justice and literacy levels in Iran requires an understanding of the complex interaction among the historical legacy of the education system, institutional structures, socio-economic conditions, and the professional model of the teacher’s role. Recent research indicates that in many developing countries, educational inequalities are not the result of a single factor but rather the outcome of a historical accumulation of inequalities over time (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Iran is no exception to the rule, and its education system has evolved within such an accumulative context.

From a historical perspective (Qajar period), the expansion of modern education in Iran began later than in many developed countries and in early stages had an elite-oriented character. As a result, universal literacy did not expand evenly across the country during its early phases. The consequence was the formation of persistent regional inequalities, whose effects remain visible even in recent decades (UNESCO, 2023). Recent studies show that some provinces continue to experience noticeable gaps in educational quality indicators and access to learning resources – a condition rooted in those early patterns of uneven development (Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2023).

The second institutional factor (Reza Shah period, 1925–1941) relates to the structural centralization of educational planning. In centralized education systems, major decisions are made at the national level, and the teacher’s role is largely confined to implementing predetermined curricula. Recent research on Iranian educational policymaking suggests that while such a structure may enhance systemic coordination, it can simultaneously reduce teachers’ professional initiative

in responding to diverse learning needs (Mehrmohammadi, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022). Consequently, teachers have limited opportunities to design instructional programs tailored to the social and cultural contexts of their students.

The third factor (Mohammad Reza Shah period, 1941–1979) concerns broader economic and social conditions. Socio-economic inequalities in Iranian society - particularly disparities in access to supplementary educational resources such as private tutoring, learning technologies, and high-quality schools - have had a direct impact on students' educational opportunities. Comparative studies show that in such contexts, schools and teachers are often compelled to assume a compensatory role, attempting to mitigate the consequences of social inequalities at later stages of education (World Bank, 2021). In contrast, in many high-performing education systems policies are designed to prevent the formation of such gaps from the outset.

The fourth factor relates to the period following the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the dominant educational culture that developed thereafter. A strong emphasis on standardized examinations, academic competition, and memorization-based learning has led much of educational activity to be organized around success in examinations. However, three structural elements have continued to hinder the realization of sustainable educational justice. First, the historical legacy of illiteracy accumulated over more than a century has maintained residual effects even in recent decades. Second, persistent economic and regional disparities have resulted in substantial variation in educational quality across provinces (World Bank, 2021). Third, the centralized and ideologically structured curriculum has limited teachers' professional autonomy and reduced their role to that of implementers of the approved curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2022).

These factors have shaped the teacher's role in Iran's education system as largely reactive and compensatory. In other words, teachers are frequently placed in positions where they must manage the consequences of social, economic, or institutional inequalities, rather than being empowered from the outset to design equitable learning structures. This dynamic helps explain the discrepancy between the quantitative expansion of education and the full realization of educational justice in Iran.

Despite significant progress in increasing school enrollment coverage and reducing illiteracy, achieving sustainable educational justice requires strengthening teachers' professional autonomy, reducing regional disparities, and shifting from compensatory policies toward preventive educational strategies (UNESCO, 2023; Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2023).

Sweden

The current state of educational justice in Sweden cannot be understood solely as the result of contemporary education policies; rather, it should be viewed as the outcome of a historical linkage between social culture, the welfare state structure, and the professional status of teachers. Recent research suggests that the success of Scandinavian education systems is less the product of short-term reforms and more the result of a long historical continuum in the development of institutional trust and social equality (OECD, 2023; Lundahl, 2016).

The first contributing factor in this regard is the cultural roots of literacy in Swedish society. The Lutheran Protestant tradition historically regarded reading and writing as part of an individual's moral responsibility toward both society and religious faith. This perspective gradually turned literacy into a cultural norm across different social classes. Historical studies show that in many Scandinavian regions, even before the emergence of modern public education systems, basic literacy rates were already relatively high (Rasmussen, 2019). Such a cultural foundation provided broad public acceptance for educational equity policies in later stages.

The second factor relates to the development of the welfare state. Sweden's welfare state is built upon the principle of social equality, which aims to reduce the influence of economic and social factors on citizens' life opportunities. In education, this philosophy has led to policies such as free education, extensive student support services, school meals, educational counseling, and needs-based school funding (OECD, 2023). These policies neutralize many of the factors that, in other countries, contribute to the production of educational inequalities before they can have significant effects.

The third factor concerns the institutional structure of the education system. Since the 1990s, educational reforms in Sweden have aimed to increase school autonomy and professionalize the teaching profession. Within this framework, teachers have moved from being mere implementers of curricula to professionals who play an active role in designing students' learning pathways (Skolverket, 2022). Recent research shows that such professional autonomy enables teachers to quickly identify learning differences and design appropriate educational interventions (OECD, 2023).

The fourth factor relates to social capital and institutional trust within Swedish society. Comparative studies indicate that the high level of social trust in Scandinavian countries creates an environment in which teachers' professional decisions receive strong support from both society and policymakers (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2020). This mutual trust allows teachers to focus primarily

on learning quality and educational equity, rather than on administrative accountability or bureaucratic supervision.

Finally, the economic structure based on resource redistribution has also played a key role in sustaining educational justice. Progressive taxation system and extensive welfare policies has provided stable funding for schools across different regions. As a result, disparities in educational quality among schools in different areas of the country has remained relatively limited (OECD, 2023). Taken together, these historical, cultural, institutional, and economic factors have caused the role of teachers in Sweden to be fundamentally preventive in nature. Equipped with professional autonomy, supportive resources, and institutional trust, teachers are able to identify and address learning differences at early stages. Consequently, schools in Sweden function not merely as institutions that compensate for inequalities, but as institutions that prevent the formation of inequalities in the first place. This characteristic is considered one of the most important factors behind Sweden's consolidation of very high literacy levels and the reduction of educational disparities in the country (Skolverket, 2022).

Finland

Explaining the state of educational justice in Finland also requires attention to the interaction between social culture, institutional reforms, and the professional model of teachers. Recent research shows that Finland's success in this area is not the result of a single policy but rather the outcome of a combination of several structural factors developed over several decades (Niemi, 2022; OECD, 2023). Historically, the culture of literacy in Finland - similar to other Scandinavian countries - was strongly influenced by the Lutheran tradition. Within this tradition, the ability to read religious texts was considered a sign of an individual's responsibility toward society. Such a perspective gave literacy a high cultural value from an early stage and made society particularly sensitive to educational inequalities (Sahlberg, 2021).

However, the major turning point in the development of educational justice in Finland occurred with the comprehensive school reform of the 1970s. The aim of this reforms was to eliminate class-based educational tracks and establish an integrated system in which all children, regardless of social background, would study within a common educational structure (FNBE, 2021). These reforms shaped the structural foundations of educational equity and helped ensure that the quality of education did not vary significantly among schools.

From the 1990s onward, Finland adopted an approach based on institutional trust in teachers. In this model, instead of relying heavily on widespread standardized testing,

responsibility for assessing and improving learning outcomes was largely entrusted to teachers (FNBE, 2023). Recent research indicates that this institutional trust has become possible because of the high quality of Finland's teacher education system; teachers in Finland possess advanced university degrees and receive research-based training (Niemi, 2022).

The teacher education system in Finland is one of the most important factors explaining the teacher's role in achieving educational justice. The requirement of a master's degree and research-based training has equipped teachers with the ability to analyze learning data, design individualized instruction, and implement early educational interventions (Sahlberg, 2021). As a result, teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but are considered designers of the learning process.

In addition, Finland's social and economic policies have also contributed to maintaining educational equity. The public funding system for schools is designed so that educational resources are distributed according to needs. This approach has ensured that differences in educational quality among schools in different regions of the country remain limited (OECD, 2023).

Overall, the combination of a literacy-supportive social culture, structural reforms of the comprehensive school system, a research-based teacher education model, and institutional trust in teachers has shaped the teacher's role in Finland as both design-oriented and preventive. In such a model, teachers prevent educational inequalities from emerging by designing individualized learning and implementing early interventions before disparities take shape. This characteristic is considered one of the key reasons for Finland's success in achieving very high literacy levels and sustainable educational equity (Niemi, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

Stage Three: Juxtaposition

In Bereday's four-stage orderly comparative model, the juxtaposition stage aims to place the data obtained from the description and interpretation stages side by side so that similarities and differences among educational systems can be observed in a structured and objective manner. At this stage, no evaluative judgment, value analysis, or final conclusion is made. Instead, the data are organized according to common indicators in order to prepare the ground for the fourth stage—analytical comparison.

Table 1: Juxtaposition of Educational Justice Indices and the Role of the Teacher

Core Component	Finland	Sweden	Iran
Literacy Rate and Access Coverage	100%; Structural prevention of inequality	Nearly 100%; Equality of learning opportunities	About 89–90%; Focus on basic literacy and minimum opportunities
Educational Structure and Governance	Decentralized, school-based, and flexible	Semi-decentralized; Balance between national framework and school autonomy	Centralized and curriculum-oriented
Spatial Justice and Opportunity Distribution	Completely equitable with no significant gaps	Relatively equal and balanced	Regional inequality and resource disparities
Intervention Model and Realization of Justice	Early intervention and proactive design	Regulatory intervention; Closing gaps	Compensatory (post-academic decline); Ensuring minimums
Level of Professionalism and Teacher Autonomy	Independent decision-maker and learning designer	Accountable specialist with moderate autonomy	Implementer of centralized policies; Limited autonomy
Teacher Training System and Institutional Support	Research-oriented with high institutional support and trust	Professional and development-oriented	Skill-oriented and relatively limited
Curriculum Type and Flexibility	Flexible and school-based	Framework-based and adaptable	Uniform and rigid

A comparative reading of the table shows that educational justice, contrary to common assumptions, is not simply the product of increased resources or rhetorical commitments to equality. Rather, it is closely related to how the teacher's role is institutionally organized within the education system. As this role evolves from being an implementer of centralized policies to an independent designer of learning and educational decision-maker, the structure of justice also shifts from a compensatory and reactive form toward a preventive and structural one. This evolutionary trajectory is clearly observable in the three countries examined.

○ *Literacy Rate and Scope of Access*

The near-universal literacy rate in Sweden and Finland, compared with the 89–90% rate in Iran, represents more than a statistical difference; rather it reflects a sign of effectiveness of different approaches to educational justice. In Iran, the emphasis on ensuring minimum access to schooling has resulted in literacy being viewed largely as the outcome of guaranteeing basic opportunities rather than as the result of designing appropriate learning processes that respond to individual differences. In contrast, Finland has achieved sustainable literacy levels through early

management of learning inequalities and flexible instructional design which in turn reproduces educational justice. In this model, education policy functions primarily as a preventive mechanism, not merely a compensatory one.

○ *Educational Structure and Governance*

In Iran, the high degree of centralization in the education system produces uniform programs and strong central control over curricular decisions. Although this structure strengthens national coordination, it also limits teachers' professional authority to adapt instruction to students' real conditions. In Sweden, the semi-decentralized model allows teachers to adjust teaching content and methods within the framework of national standards according to cultural and linguistic differences. In Finland, a school-based system built on institutional trust transforms teachers from policy followers into active designers of educational practice. This structural difference causes educational justice in Iran tends to operate primarily at the policy level, while in Finland it is institutionalized at the school level.

○ *Spatial Equity and Distribution of Opportunities*

In Iran, regional disparities and unequal access to educational resources require teachers in disadvantaged areas to devote much of their professional effort to compensating for resource shortages. In contrast, Sweden and Finland employ resource allocation mechanisms based on social welfare principles and needs-based funding, which significantly reduce spatial inequalities and create more balanced educational conditions. This structural emphasis on spatial equity shifts the teacher's function from being a compensator of inequality to a promoter of learning quality, establishing a direct relationship between institutional justice and professional practice.

○ *Models of Intervention in Educational Justice*

The three countries represent three distinct models of educational intervention:

- Iran: compensatory interventions after academic decline, emphasizing correction of outcomes rather than prevention of causes.
- Sweden: regulatory and balancing interventions aimed at reducing performance gaps among students.
- Finland: early and multi-tiered interventions implemented before inequalities become entrenched.

The maturity of the Finnish model illustrates that sustainable educational justice emerges when interventions occur at the design stage of learning, rather than during the remediation of educational failure. This shift has transformed educational justice from a supportive strategy into an empowerment-oriented strategy.

- *Level of Teacher Professionalism and Autonomy*

In Iran, teachers primarily function as implementers of centralized curricula and agents responsible for meeting standardized expectations. In Sweden, teachers operate as accountable professionals responsible for ensuring educational outcomes within national goals. In Finland, teachers act as educational decision-makers, enjoying broad autonomy in curriculum design, assessment, and content selection. This professional evolution represents the key link between institutional trust and educational justice: the higher the level of trust placed in teachers, the more democratic the educational structure becomes and the more sustainable educational justice becomes.

- *Teacher Education System and Institutional Support*

In Iran, teacher education mainly focuses on basic instructional skills, and pathways for professional advancement remain relatively limited. Sweden, through development-oriented training systems and continuous professional learning, attempts to maintain and update teachers' professional competence. Finland goes further by establishing a research-based teacher education system in which a master's degree is required for entry into the profession. In this context, the teacher education system itself functions as a scientific guarantor of educational justice. For this reason, the relationship between teacher education quality and the effectiveness of the educational justice system is institutionally embedded in Finland.

- *Curriculum Type and Instructional Flexibility*

In Iran, the curriculum tends to be uniform, content-centered, and relatively inflexible. In Sweden, it operates within a national framework that allows teachers to adapt instruction according to the cultural and demographic context of schools. In Finland, the curriculum is largely school-based and frequently organized around learning projects. Differences in curriculum flexibility reflect the degree of teacher participation in educational decision-making. The greater this participation, the more educational justice is realized not only in terms of equal opportunities, but also in terms of the quality of learning experiences.

Stage Four: Comparison

The final comparison of Iran, Sweden, and Finland - based on descriptive findings, historical interpretation, and structural juxtaposition - shows that although all three education systems consider educational justice an integral mission of public education and recognize the teacher as the key actor in achieving it, their historical trajectories, governance models, types of teacher intervention, and levels of teacher professionalism differ fundamentally, and these differences have had direct consequences for literacy levels and the quality of learning.

The first major axis of difference concerns the degree of centralization in educational policymaking and the organization of decision-making processes. Iran represents a highly centralized system in which curricula, instructional materials, implementation policies, and even assessment methods are largely determined at the national level and teachers have limited authority to adapt instruction based on students' real learning needs. In contrast, Sweden since the 1990s has adopted a semi-decentralized structure, transferring part of educational planning authority to municipalities and schools. Finland has moved even further by maximizing school-level and professional autonomy, operating within a highly decentralized model. These governance differences directly affect the extent of teacher agency: in Iran, teachers function primarily as implementers of predetermined programs, whereas in Sweden and Finland they are recognized as professional experts and educational decision-makers.

From these structural differences emerge distinct patterns in the nature of teacher roles and interventions. In Iran, the teacher's role is largely compensatory; educational intervention typically occurs after academic decline, dropout risk, or learning weaknesses have already appeared. This reactive role is partly a consequence of the centralized curriculum and partly the result of institutional pressures and structural constraints that limits preventive instructional design. In Sweden, the teacher's role is primarily regulatory, focusing on identifying learning differences and using educational tools and social support systems to reduce achievement gaps. In Finland, however, the teacher's role is deeply preventive. Educational interventions begin in the earliest years of schooling, with the explicit goal of preventing the emergence of inequality. This difference in intervention models is one of the most important factors explaining variations in literacy levels among the three countries, because comparative research consistently shows that sustainable literacy emerges when educational intervention occurs before inequalities become established.

A third area of difference concerns the professional status of teachers and the level of institutional support they receive. In Iran, despite various efforts toward professional development,

institutional support structures remain relatively limited, and teachers often face multiple expectations, some of which fall outside professional teaching roles. In Sweden, teachers benefit from multi-layered support systems, including continuous professional training, clearly defined professional responsibilities, and diagnostic tools for monitoring student learning. Finland goes even further: research-based teacher education at the master's level and a strong culture of institutional trust place teachers at the highest level of professional status. These differences in institutional support significantly influence teachers' capacity for professional agency. Consequently, teachers in Sweden and Finland are not merely implementers but also designers and decision-makers in educational processes.

From the perspective of broader outcomes, analysis of data from the three countries suggests a direct relationship between the level of teacher autonomy and professional capacity and the level of literacy and educational equity. In Iran, literacy remains around 90 percent, and regional and gender disparities are still observable. In contrast, Sweden and Finland - thanks to structured and professional teacher roles - have achieved literacy rates close to 100 percent, with performance gaps either minimal or quickly addressed through preventive mechanisms. Therefore, these findings indicate that literacy outcomes are not solely the result of financial investment; rather, they depend heavily on the organization of the teacher's role, institutional trust, professional autonomy, and the type of educational intervention adopted within the system.

Based on these findings, the comparative model of the three countries suggests three major implications for educational justice policymaking in Iran. First, achieving sustainable educational justice requires a reconfiguration of the professional role of teachers. Teachers can effectively contribute to reducing educational inequalities only when they possess sufficient professional autonomy in choosing instructional methods, adapting content, and designing learning pathways. Second, strengthening early intervention mechanisms is essential. Finland's experience clearly demonstrates that educational justice becomes effective when intervention occurs in the early stages of learning - before inequalities become entrenched. Third, reducing excessive centralization in educational decision-making and strengthening institutional support structures can help narrow the gap between national policies and classroom realities, enabling teachers to respond more effectively to students' actual learning needs.

Overall, the final comparison of Iran, Sweden, and Finland shows that educational justice ultimately emerges from the interaction between educational governance structures and the professional agency of teachers. In systems where teachers are positioned and entrusted as learning designers, trusted professionals, and active educational agents, universal and sustainable

literacy has been achieved and inequalities are addressed at their source. In contrast, in systems where the teacher's role remains limited, dependent, and primarily compensatory, educational justice tends to remain at a minimal level. Therefore, improving educational justice in Iran depends less on increasing financial resources and more on redefining the teacher's professional role, expanding professional autonomy, strengthening institutional support, and institutionalizing early intervention strategies

Table 2: Similarities and Differences between the Educational Systems of Iran, Sweden and Finland

Educational Equity and Teacher Roles Components	Iran	Finland	Sweden
Structure of the education system and literacy rate	-	*	*
Spatial equity and distribution of educational resources	-	*	*
Emphasis of official documents and definition of educational equity	*	*	*
Role of the education system in achieving equity and type of intervention	-	*	*
Professional status and level of teacher authority	-	*	*
Teacher's role in policy-making and guiding learning	-	*	*
Teacher education system and institutional trust	-	*	*

The comparison of the educational systems of Iran, Sweden, and Finland across seven main dimensions shows that educational justice in these countries follows different paths in terms of definition, structure, and the role of teachers. In Iran, the emphasis on literacy expansion and universal access coverage to schooling has led to the development of a centralized and compensatory model of educational justice. In contrast, Sweden and Finland, with their decentralized and school-based systems, have institutionalized educational justice primarily through the quality of learning and equal educational opportunities rather than merely access to schooling.

Spatial inequality and limitations in educational resources in Iran, along with the relatively limited professional autonomy of teachers, have resulted in educational justice being implemented largely as an institutional and top-down policy. In the Nordic countries, however, the distribution of resources and teacher authority is based on institutional trust and the real needs of schools, allowing justice to be enacted more directly within classroom practice.

The concept of educational justice also differs across the three countries. In Iran, justice is largely defined as equal access to education. In Sweden, it is understood as balancing educational

outcomes and reducing achievement gaps. In Finland, the concept emphasizes fair and preventive learning, focusing on addressing inequalities before they become entrenched.

Correspondingly, the models of educational intervention differ. In Iran, interventions are mainly compensatory, addressing problems after academic decline has occurred. In Sweden, they are regulatory, aiming to balance learning differences among students. In Finland, interventions **are** preventive, beginning early in the learning process to avoid the formation of inequality.

Teachers in Finland and Sweden play an active role in policymaking and curriculum design, whereas in Iran teachers mainly function as implementers of centrally determined regulations. Teacher education also differs significantly: in Iran it is largely skill-oriented, in Sweden development-oriented, and in Finland research-based. This difference has created a strong connection between professional competence and institutional justice within the Finnish education system. Overall, the comparison suggests that educational justice becomes sustainable and effective when teachers move from the position of “implementers” to “designers of learning,” and when institutional trust forms the foundation of educational decision-making. The differences among the three countries indicate that the depth of teacher professionalization is a key factor shaping different models of educational justice.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study, based on the four stages of Bereday’s comparative method, indicate that educational justice in Iran, Sweden, and Finland has developed within different historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. These differences have consequently shaped the role of teachers in distinct ways within each educational system. Results from the description and interpretation stages show that the Iranian education system is still influenced by the historical legacy of widespread illiteracy and a highly centralized administrative structure. Conditions which have led the teacher’s role to take on a largely compensatory and reactive character so that educational interventions typically occur after academic decline or educational inequality has already emerged (World Bank, 2021). This finding aligns with research that identifies structural centralization and limited teacher professional autonomy as factors reducing the effectiveness of education systems. World Bank reports also indicate that in centralized systems teachers tend to function primarily as policy implementers, with limited capacity to adjust learning processes according to students’ diverse needs. At the same time, the

findings of the present study suggest that the core issue in Iran is not merely limited resources. Rather, the structure of educational governance and the level of teachers' professional agency play a decisive role.

In contrast, examination of the education systems of Sweden and Finland shows that historical developments such as the formation of the welfare state, high levels of social trust, and advanced teacher education systems have elevated the teacher's role beyond the implementation of curriculum toward that of a "learning regulator" or "designer of educational processes" (Sahlberg, 2021; OECD, 2023). This result is consistent with a large body of international literature that attributes the success of Nordic education systems to teacher professional autonomy, institutional trust, and the high quality of teacher education. In such systems, teachers are not only responsible for delivering the curriculum but also play an active role in diagnosing learning problems, adjusting educational pathways, and participating in school-level decision-making. The findings also indicate that even in the presence of challenges such as cultural diversity and migration, the professional role of teachers remains one of the most important mechanisms for managing educational inequality in these countries.

One of the most significant analytical findings of the present research is the relationship between educational governance models and the level of teachers' professional agency. The results of the comparison stage demonstrate that the greater the degree of centralization in educational policymaking, the more the teacher's role becomes limited to implementing guidelines, thereby reducing the possibility of preventive intervention in the learning process (Ministry of Education, 2022). This conclusion is consistent with international research indicating that excessive centralization may restrict teachers' professional creativity and educational flexibility. Reports from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also show that in countries where teachers and schools are granted greater autonomy, there is a stronger capacity to identify learning difficulties early and prevent the deepening of educational gaps (OECD, 2023). Although some analyses consider centralization a factor contributing to coherence within education systems, the findings of this study suggest that excessive centralization may reduce the capacity of education systems to respond effectively to students' individual differences.

On the other hand, the experience of Finland demonstrates that extensive teacher professional autonomy, combined with a research-based teacher education system, creates favorable conditions for preventive educational interventions (FNBE, 2021). In this model, teachers rely on research knowledge and diagnostic skills to identify and address learning gaps before they become entrenched. In Iran, however, due to structural limitations, educational interventions often occur only after problems have already emerged, which gives educational justice a predominantly compensatory character rather than a preventive one.

Overall, the results of the comparative analysis indicate that the differences in literacy levels and learning quality among Iran, Sweden, and Finland are not solely the result of financial investment or the scope of educational services. Rather, they largely reflect the professional status of teachers within each educational system. In systems where teachers are positioned as professional decision-makers and designers of the learning process, educational justice takes on a preventive character, increasing the likelihood of achieving universal and sustainable literacy (Sahlberg, 2021; OECD, 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that improving educational justice in Iran requires reconsidering the current model of educational governance and strengthening teachers' professional agency so that teachers, beyond purely executive roles, can play a more active role in diagnosing, regulating, and guiding learning processes and create the ground to shift from compensatory interventions toward preventive educational strategies.

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