

Students From Ukraine in Polish Schools – The Main Difficulties and Areas for School Leader Support

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the challenge and task faced by Polish schools, their leaders and headteachers in supporting the development and education of child refugees from Ukraine. Social, political and economic upheavals, together with natural disasters, are major, recurring causes of the displacement of people worldwide. Hosting nations are constantly seeking ways and means to meet the diverse needs of refugees, with schools incessantly being urged to play a major role in the inclusion of migrant students in all aspects of school life. The refugee crisis has affected the Polish school system and its management on an unprecedented scale. Reducing any obstacles to accessing the Polish educational system for Ukrainian/child refugees was a priority, to avoid any type of jeopardy to their rights to education. The immediate priority was to ensure education continuity primarily by integration into the mainstream education system or, if this was not possible, with temporary preparatory classes. It is worth noting, that Polish teachers were generally unprepared to teach foreigners, and in many cases opening classes to Ukrainian refugees was their first experience in tackling this challenge. Due to the effort of school leaders, the government and NGO's, foreign students received psychological and pedagogical assistance in connection with their migration experience.

Key words: *headteachers | management | schools | ukrainian refugees | teachers | support*

Učenci iz Ukrajine v poljskih šolah – glavne težave in področja podpore vodjem šol

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Povzetek

Namen tega prispevka je analizirati izzive in naloge, s katerimi se soočajo poljske šole, njihovi vodje in ravnatelji pri podpiranju razvoja in izobraževanja otrok beguncev iz Ukrajine. Poleg naravnih nesreč so družbeni, politični in gospodarski pretresi glavni in ponavljajoči se vzroki za razseljevanje ljudi po vsem svetu. Države gostiteljice nenehno iščejo načine in sredstva za zadovoljevanje različnih potreb beguncev, šole pa morajo odigrati pomembno vlogo pri vključevanju učencev migrantov v vse vidike šolskega življenja. Begunska kriza je poljski šolski sistem in njegovo vodenje prizadela v obsegu brez primere. Prednostna naloga je bila zmanjševanje ovir za dostop ukrajinskih otrok do poljskega izobraževalnega sistema in s tem preprečevanje morebitnega ogrožanja pravice do izobraževanja. Najprej je bilo treba zagotoviti kontinuiteto izobraževanja, zlasti z vključevanjem v redni izobraževalni sistem ali, če to ni bilo mogoče, z začasnim pripravljavnim poukom. Omeniti velja, da poljski učitelji na splošno niso bili pripravljeni na poučevanje tujcev, tako da je bilo organiziranje pouka za ukrajinske begunce pogosto njihova prva izkušnja pri soočanju s takšnim izzivom. S prizadevanjem vodstev šol, vlade in nevladnih organizacij so bili tuji učenci deležni psihološke in pedagoške pomoči pri svoji migracijski izkušnji.

Ključne besede: ravnatelji | vodenje | šole | ukrajinski begunci | učitelji | podpora

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has uprooted children and families from their homes, creating a child protection and children's rights emergency. Over 11 million people have fled their homes: nearly a quarter of the total population of Ukraine. The majority, over 7.1 million people, have been internally displaced, of which an estimated 2.8 million are children¹. Displacement has placed women and children at increased risk of gender-based violence, abuse, psychological trauma, trafficking, and family separation. Due to the introduction of martial law, men of Ukrainian citizenship aged 18 to 60 are forbidden from leaving the country.

Millions of Ukrainian children who, with their families, have been severely traumatised by displacement, separation, loss and war are seeking refuge throughout Europe. Once the physical imperative of resettlement into communities, accommodation and schools is met, attention must critically focus on restoring children's social and emotional well-being. Without this immediate and on-going support, child refugees suffer long term disruption to their growth, development and life chances. Social, political and economic upheavals, coupled with natural disasters, are major, recurring causes of the displacement of people worldwide. Hosting nations are constantly seeking ways and means to meet the diverse needs of refugees, with schools incessantly being urged to play a major role in the inclusion of migrant students in all aspects of school life.

All people fleeing from Ukraine and seeking refuge in Poland, are legally allowed to stay in Poland. At reception points, which are the refugee's first point of contact after crossing the Polish border, they are provided with food, medical care and other necessary supplies, with the help of the army and volunteers. From there, refugees are directed to temporary accommodation near the Polish border, and later to major cities in Poland. In a matter of days, the movement spread throughout the whole of Poland. In addition, a large number of citizens and organisations voluntarily offered free accommodation and other assistance for Ukrainians in need. Refugees are provided with free medical care, free transport, financial benefits, and the possibility of obtaining a PESEL number². In each voivodeship (province),

1 Information obtained from www.unicef.org

2 The PESEL number (ID number) is an eleven-digit numeric symbol, used in Poland, which allows for easy identification of the person who has it. The PESEL number includes the date of birth, serial number, gender and control number.

reception points for refugees were opened, where local authorities and huge numbers of volunteers provided free accommodation, food and other necessary supplies. Approximately 3.37 million Ukrainian people are now residing in Poland³.

Ukrainian children in Polish schools

Children and youths, who come to Poland due to the war in Ukraine, can continue their education in Polish schools. According to estimates, there are about 7-800'000 children from Ukraine of school age in Poland⁴. At the beginning of the summer holidays in 2022, there was noticeably a lower number (185'000) of Ukrainian children taking up education for the school year 2022/2023.

The number of Ukrainian children, with their families, that arrived in Europe's schools (mainly to Polish schools) was unprecedented, but it is worth pointing out that the number of children from Ukraine who joined Polish schools varies greatly between school units. Nevertheless, since the beginning of war, the number of foreign children in school units at every level of education increased significantly. Due to such a large number of refugees, the Ministry of Education and Science regulations on the organisation of education, upbringing and care for children and youths who are citizens of Ukraine⁵ had to be amended. In almost 21.6 percent of schools units, population growth has not exceeded 5 percent of its pre-crisis amount. In one third of the classes (33.3%) the student population increased by 5 to 10 percent due to accepting the Ukrainian students. In the next 21.6 percent of the school units, child refugees enlarged the class community by 10 to 15 percent, which has almost certainly influenced the functioning of the classes – the process of integration and communication and most importantly the teaching itself has been affected. For 2 percent of schools, the change was much greater, ranging from 35 to 40 percent of new children into the school units.

The incoming refugees in such numbers influence the structure of the class groups and become another challenge for the school headteacher and teachers assigned to these classes. This represents a major logistical challenge,

3 Information obtained from Polish government site: <https://www.gov.pl/>

4 Vide footnote nr 21, data from September 2022

5 Information obtained from Polish government site: <https://www.gov.pl/>

as well as social responsibility. It requires substantial additional capacities, both in terms of infrastructure and staff (Białek, 2015).

Additional urgent needs in relation to Ukrainian refugees concerned clarification of the procedure applied for the graduation of final grades in the current school year and the delivery of certificates, and for access to the next level of education, and has been resolved in Poland by simplifying the procedures. Children and adolescents from Ukraine of compulsory education age (7-18 years) are admitted to public schools and taken into care on the terms applicable to Polish citizens. In order to enrol a child in a school, an application must be submitted to the school leader. The year (of study) is determined on the basis of documents issued by the school in the home country, and in their absence, the parents' declaration of the total years of education abroad. Moreover, the child's parents may ask the school headteacher for them to be admitted to a lower grade than that which results from the sum of completed school years, e.g., due to the child's age. Admission to schools takes place throughout the entire school year and the determination of the year in which education is to be continued is based on the sum of the school years completed in Ukraine. With the admission of students from Ukraine into schools, many questions arose regarding the differences in the education system and curricula in Ukraine⁶.

Support in education for children coming from abroad

Reducing any obstacles to accessing the Polish educational system for Ukrainian child refugees was a priority to avoid any type of jeopardy to their rights to education and further delays in their future pathways. The immediate priority was to ensure education continuity, primarily by integration into the mainstream education system or, if this was not possible, with temporary preparatory classes. As stated, foreigners who do not speak Polish fluently enough can benefit from education at school in different forms. They can participate in additional Polish language classes, while learning in public units, which can be conducted individually or in groups for a minimum of two hours (up to maximum of six hours) a week for an indefinite

⁶ Ukrainian school starts at the age of 6. Since the reform of 2017, the period of education in Ukraine is gradually being extended from 11 to 12 years. Its implementation is taking place over three stages: primary school (4 years), lower secondary school (5 years), high school (full secondary education) - currently 2 years (3 years from 2027). Information obtained from Polish government site: <https://www.gov.pl/>

period. Or they can carry out education in the form of a preparatory units, where the teaching process is adapted to the needs and educational capabilities of the students. Learning lasts one year with the possibility of extending it to two years. A student from Ukraine attending the preparatory department will not be subjected to the annual assessment. Classes are carried out in groups of up to 15 students with a minimum of 20 to 26 hours a week (depending on the year of study and the type of school)⁷.

To conclude, in the Polish education system there are two ways of teaching foreign students: either they enter a unit at the level obtained in their home county, or they attend preparatory units. Ninety percent of schools educate children from Ukraine in regular units, and approximately only 40 percent of Polish schools have launched preparatory units. But it is worth emphasising, that only 10 percent of Ukrainian children are taught in the preparatory units! This means that the vast majority have been included in the existing classes under the Polish curriculum, together with Polish students. Or at least they are trying. Given the abovementioned data on the number of Ukrainian children enlarging existing classes, we can state that the learning process for Ukrainian and also Polish children can be difficult, and it surely presents teachers with a huge challenge (Rafał-Łuniewska J., 2022).

Teaching a foreigner

It is worth noting that Polish teachers were generally unprepared to teach foreigners. In most cases opening classes to Ukrainian refugees was their first experience in tackling this challenge. In the process of becoming teachers, students are learning to be experts in the field of tough subject(s). They are also required to complete psychological and pedagogical courses, in order to learn how to teach and become effective, reflective teachers. If they are lucky, they may have had a class concerning the topic of diversity and tolerance. Teaching a foreign student or refugee is not included in the compulsory study programme for future teachers as stated by the Journals of Law of the Polish Parliament!⁸

Some recent research conducted on-line on teachers showed how difficult and challenging this situation is for them (Pyżalski et al, 2022). The team

⁷ Information obtained from Polish government site, resources from Ministry of Education and Science: <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka.pl>

⁸ <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20170001575/O/D20171575.pdf>

researched over seven hundred teachers and it was clearly shown that it is a huge challenge for the majority of teachers. The data showed that most of the teachers, who were currently educating students from Ukraine, had no or little experience with teaching young people from Ukraine or other countries. Only four percent of surveyed teachers had worked with students from Ukraine before. In addition, almost nine out of ten teachers did not speak any of the Ukrainian language. It is worth emphasising that one-third of surveyed teachers teaching in units with Polish and Ukrainian students, have not participated in any training on the methodology of working with migrant or refugee groups of children, because the school headteacher didn't arrange any training for them! It clearly shows that some school headteachers didn't recognise the need to prepare for the child refugees and moreover didn't take advantage of help offered by many non-governmental organisations at that time.

The analysed report also showed that almost 30 percent of teachers indicate that most child refugees want to share information about their culture. Unfortunately, teachers indicate that half of the Polish students are reluctant to talk to children who have come to Poland as a result of the war. Nine percent of teachers point out that a lot of Polish students say that they are treated unfairly compared to children from Ukraine and that too much attention is focused on Ukrainian children. It shows that the inclusion process was not monitored as carefully as it should have been, or perhaps even that it was neglected by school headteachers (Lutterbach, Beelmann, 2021). This shows us that school headteachers, who opened up to the school community needs of teachers, other staff and most importantly to Polish and Ukrainian children, got the help they needed from the government, NGOs's and parents of children attending the school. Some headteachers didn't reflect enough on the need of the school community and decided that admitting the child refugees was enough (Pyzalski et al, 2022).

These clear results therefore indicate a risk of exclusion or directed peer violence against the children of this group. Only a few children from Ukraine adapt well in the peer group. Various issues related to the mental health of this group of children also prove to be a challenge. Every fifth teacher indicates that half or more of the children in this group have symptoms of depression and low mood; four out of ten teachers indicate that most or all children from Ukraine with whom they work express concern and fear for their relatives who stayed in Ukraine. We have to emphasise, that 7% of teachers believe that most or all children who started learning in Polish

schools show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and every eleventh teacher that half or more of the students have special requirements. At the same time, over 44% of the respondents could not assess whether they have such students in their class. 25% of the surveyed teachers believe that children and adolescents who have come from Ukraine are brought up in families that are currently in a difficult financial situation. In their opinion, it concerns half or more of students who were forced to leave their country as a result of the war. 25% of teachers note that half of the families from Ukraine join various school initiatives, even those unrelated to their children. 16% of teachers say that parents or guardians of children from Ukraine do not contact school. 25% of teachers believe that all of the Polish parents, or most of them, actively help Ukrainian families. Although negative attitudes towards this group of families are very rare, it is impossible not to notice that they do occasionally appear (Pyżalski et al, 2022).

The teachers themselves also require support. Research shows that they are heavily burdened by new duties. Overload was confirmed by 40 percent of the teachers. 10 percent of teachers indicate great difficulties in coping with stereotypical and negative opinions about Ukrainian students, verbalised by Polish students (Lutterbach, Beelmann, 2021). This represents another important issue, which should be recognised by school headteachers and leaders in the process of the inclusion (Białek, 2015).

School leadership

More than half of the school headteachers state they have started, since the beginning of the Ukraine invasion, deepened cooperation with the governing body, social welfare institutions, psychological and pedagogical clinics aimed at good quality education of students from Ukraine, and other institutions (Pyżalski et al, 2022). Effective action in the face of a new challenge for Poland, namely the influx of refugees, required the leadership of the school headteachers to foster an innovative and inclusive educational environment (Magno & Schiff, 2010; Theoharis, & Causton-Theoharis, 2010;).

As the number of students with refugee backgrounds grew, schools faced many new challenges. How could school leaders ensure they provided a positive, supportive and inclusive educational environment for these students and their families? Different researchers have pointed out several important actions, which can easily be implemented by school headteachers/leaders. We point out the most important of them below:

Raise awareness in the school community that knowing the students, their backgrounds, their histories and their current situation is key to putting in place appropriate people and programmes to support those who need more care or special support. Get to know the students and their families and communities, because it is important for school leaders and teachers to work collaboratively with students, parents and their communities to support students' learning programmes (Wilkinson, Kaukko, 2018). Moreover, research indicates that successful school leaders demonstrate a common set of understandings, dispositions, and practices (Howard, 2007; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016;). For instance, Howard (2007) suggests that headteachers who are effective in diverse contexts adhere to five phases, namely building trust, engaging personal culture, confronting issues of social dominance and social justice, transforming instructional practices, and engaging the entire school community. On average, leaders who are successful in diverse settings are critically self-reflective, cognizant of the internal and external school contexts, and centred on improving student educational experience. Riehl points to three critical tasks or practices she identified after conducting a vast analysis of scholarship, about the headteacher's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programmes, and building relationships between schools and communities. In the following sections, Riehl noted that sense-making or meaning making inside and outside the school community about any form of change is constructed around peoples' beliefs about the school. Importantly, "facilitating the inclusion of elementary refugee students occurs not simply when technical changes in structure and process are undertaken, but when persons inside and outside of the school construct new understandings about what the change means" (Riehl, 2000, p.60).

Appoint a respected staff member to take charge of the refugee student's needs (Kaukko, Wilkinson, 2018). By appointing, training and caring for suitably resource qualified staff, school headteachers take care of the school staff, ensuring that they are both efficient and well equipped for the given task. This point was often overlooked by school headteachers in Poland, as research shows (Pyżalski et al, 2022).

Have clear policies and protocols to address exclusion, push for modelling appropriate attitudes and behaviours, because no matter how well provided a supportive and inclusive environment, some discrimination processes will occur (Wilkinson, Kaukko, 2018). Concentrate on the strengths of the

community in supporting the effort of opening the school community to refugee students and their families. Never underestimate the goodwill that lies in your local community. Seek out people and groups of goodwill, join with them and work together (Kaukko, Wilkinson, 2018). Moreover, Howard suggested that headteachers can influence meaning-making through a variety of common school activities/events. For instance, headteachers can engage different stakeholders in fostering new meanings about diversity by seizing opportunities such as official school ceremonies, school meetings, and public school-community relations events. Also, headteachers could restructure, re-organise or redesign school procedures and practices that acknowledge and are sensitive to diversity. For the different school constituents to embrace new meanings, it requires a collective discursive process that engages everyone in co-creating the new meaning. (Howard, 2007).

Psychological and pedagogical help

The first point to consider is that the inclusion of refugees into education is not only about learning. Indeed, before displaced children can return to learning they need to be comfortable, composed and settled in their new school. Educational inclusion of refugee students can take place when education practices address three dimensions: learning needs (e.g. learning the language of instruction, catching up on schooling, and adjusting to the new education system), social needs (e.g. communication with others, including non-refugees, feeling a sense of belonging and bonding, and developing a strong personal identity) and last but not least - emotional needs (e.g. feeling safe, coping with separation, loss, grief, and trauma by restoring self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills). The immediate priority is to offer child refugees a place where they feel secure and can access education, together with addressing psychological trauma and language barriers. This requires a comprehensive approach, which combines the efforts of government, school community and the Ukrainian families themselves (Gooden, Davies, 2016).

A child's brain, like an adult brain, processes and reacts to experiences and step-by-step information. These stages generally range from immediate physical response, such as sweaty palms or a "lump" in the throat, to emotional reactions such as feeling angry or sad. Then there is an area of the brain that responds for thinking. When the thinking part is involved, we are able to organise our thoughts, devote time to reflecting and then take action to make sure of the best possible turn of events. Children and students who

have experienced injury or extremely mentally stressful situations often progress otherwise, because their brains are overwhelmed experiences of violence and stress that disrupt the normal flow of information and experience processing. Then the “thinking part” of the brain turns off while the areas responsible for more emotional and physical reactions are still active. This leads to more extremes of physical and emotional behaviour than those that might be expected in a given situation. For example, during a conversation with someone, a student may suddenly become angry and hit another child without even realising it; another student may suddenly start complaining of abdominal pain, and yet another student may keep an emotional distance from the environment and avoid everything (Pisaruk et al, 2022).

Refugee students, in particular, present a number of challenging aspects. Many have endured traumatic experiences (they carry the scars of post-traumatic stress disorder - PTSD), due to exposure to violence and torture, experiences in refugee camps, being displaced from their homes and, and disconnected from family members; language barriers; and the struggles with acculturation in their newly adopted home (McBrien, 2005).

Trauma is a permanent and severe psychological trauma caused by dramatic experiences. Very often the consequences of trauma form a set of symptoms known as traumatic stress (post-traumatic stress disorder), it changes the way students feel and react, due to dramatic external events or experiences. Trauma disintegrates life, changes personality, leads to mental disorders. The result of trauma can be depression, neurosis, anxiety, inability to cope with nervous tension. A traumatised person may react by withdrawing from interpersonal relations and social life, but may also show pathological hyperactivity, including, above all, aggression. One of the effects of trauma is traumatic stress. Typical symptoms of traumatic stress are: very high level of perceived anxiety, sleep disturbance, persistent return in the mind to the source of the trauma, avoiding any circumstances in real life that may be related to the stressor, the persistence of tension for a long time - even several years. Treatment of traumatic stress is based on psychotherapy, social integrating activities, and sometimes psychiatric medical treatment (ICD11 on PTSD⁹).

Building relationships between schools and communities acknowledges that educating the whole child cannot be accomplished by schools single-hand-

9 <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/585833559>

edly; schools are not quite equipped with the capacity to deal with this task alone. School-community partnerships create collaborative opportunities to meet student needs and, in the process, strengthen working relationships between schools and community organisations (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016).

Due to the efforts of school leaders, the government and NGO's, foreign students have been receiving psychological and pedagogical assistance in connection with their migration experience. The help consists of identifying and satisfying individual developmental and educational needs as well as recognising individual psychophysical abilities and environmental factors influencing its functioning. Psychological and pedagogical assistance at school is organised by the school leader and assistance is provided by teachers and specialists who work at the school: psychologists, pedagogues, speech therapists, vocational counsellors and pedagogical therapists. Psychological and pedagogical assistance is organised and provided in cooperation with parents of students and is conducted in cooperation with other entities such as: psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, teacher training centres, other schools, non-governmental organisations and other institutions and entities acting for families, children and adolescents.

Psychological and pedagogical help could also be extended to students' parents. Ukrainian children and youths could also obtain support outside school - psychological and pedagogical counselling centres (psychotherapy, psychologist, pedagogue, speech therapist) and mental health clinics (psychiatrist, psychotherapist, neurologist, speech therapist). Psychological and pedagogical counselling centres also support teachers on how to teach and react in the event of the difficult behaviour or educational difficulties of students. Often, in psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, there are also supportive activities for children and parents. Many associations and foundations take care of refugees from Ukraine, offering free psychological and psychiatric help, as well as help in learning the Polish language. (por. Gov.pl)

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to emphasise the role of school headteachers and the school community in coping with the new challenge of the refugee crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Polish schools are increasingly confronted with cultural diversity. Despite the positive changes, the

need to develop the cultural identity of Polish students in the conditions of a heterogeneous (rather than homogeneous) society and students of different national, ethnic and religious origins (not only those belonging to national minorities, ethnic minorities and those with a regional language) is still underestimated or even overlooked. In the longer term, such a state poses a danger of dispersing the cultural identity of young people, and consequently a sense of lack of roots, uncertainty and loss. In the context of the refugee crisis, systemic and mental changes have had to be accelerated.

It is important for foreign students to receive support from school directors, and for school counsellors and teachers support in adapting the forms and methods of work, school requirements and assessment as well as an individual approach to discover the potential and strengths of foreign children. Only an individual approach will open the way for this group of students to succeed according to their own abilities and will guarantee development opportunities in various areas of life. It is important to refer to the results of the diagnosis, in a manner adequate to current needs, to support foreigners in learning Polish as a foreign language, levelling out curriculum differences and school backlogs, and to create space for them to develop their own cultural and religious identity, and inter-cultural integration. It should not be forgotten that working with foreign students and culturally diverse classes requires the teaching staff to constantly develop inter-cultural competence, acquire methodological knowledge and diagnostic skills. It should also be remembered that there is no one universal program and methodological model that would enable dealing with all situations that arise at the crossroads of cultures, therefore continuous self-education in this field is necessary.

Genuine help for children, apart from access to education, should focus on deepened integration, openness to dealing with new problems and the needs of child refugees and their families, who are a part of the school community. Community leaders, such as the school headteacher and others, who take responsibility for this process, should use the help and resources available so that the whole community is united and cared for.

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