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New Challenges Faced by the Polish Institutions of Preschool and Early-School Education (ECEC) in the Context of the War in Ukraine

Abstract

The subject of this article is the preparation of Polish preschool and early-school education for working with the refugee children who have fallen victim to the war in Ukraine. The main aim of the research is to review and analyze the Polish and foreign literature on the subject of early childhood education and care (ECEC). As a result of the archive and library searches, it was ascertained that rather little research into the matter has been conducted in Poland (the reason for which is the absence of previous experience with minors being war refugees) and that there is a rich experience in the countries of the West, as confirmed by the extensive literature of the subject. This article indicates the principal directions of research and activities – the problem of war trauma as experienced by a child, supporting the families

of refugee children, and providing ECEC teachers with the necessary competences for working with children refugees afflicted by war. This article constitutes a *sui generis* introduction to research on preparing Polish ECEC teachers for the challenges connected with the war in Ukraine and the presence of Ukrainian children refugees in the Polish institutions of education.

Keywords: nursery school, early-school education, minor war refugee

Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine which commenced on February 24, 2022 triggered a wave of war refugees of an unprecedented scale and intensity. Within a single month, more than 4 million minors left Ukraine as war refugees, approximately 2.5 million of whom crossed the Polish border.

At the time of writing, there are no exact estimates regarding the number of these refugee children remaining in Poland or the number who are likely to arrive in the country. Nevertheless, such a large number of refugee children means that our country is facing challenges unlike any other it has struggled against before. The fact that the majority of refugees are children and young people means that one of the principal tasks facing the Polish authorities – apart from providing medical care and the means of subsistence – is to make education available to them. It is impossible to predict how much more time this armed conflict will last or how many refugee children will remain in Poland. The Polish educational system nevertheless must take into consideration the necessity of providing Ukrainian children with universal education. It is the task of this article to analyze the Polish and international state of affairs in terms of research into the education of minors as war refugees in the context of the readiness of the Polish preschool and early-school education system to receive and work with Ukrainian children.

Research Problem

The research problem is the theoretical and practical preparation of the Polish institutions of the preschool and early-school education system for working with minor war refugees from Ukraine. The author determines the state of research into the problem in Poland as well as in foreign countries. In this article, the international term *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) is applied to refer to this level of preschool and primary school education.

Method and Material

This article applies the content analysis method, also referred to as the document analysis method. Scientific texts constitute the documents being researched (Łobocki 2009, p. 214). The subject matter of the research is publications relevant to the education of minor war refugees in preschool and early-school institutions. Earl Babbie defines research with the application of the content analysis as non-reactive research, in the course of which a researcher does not exert any influence on the research subject or on the analysis of the research problem. This method entails the analysis of records of human stories and experiences (Babbie, 2013, pp. 356–358).

Polish Research Into the Education of Minor War Refugees

Edyta Januszewska, in her monograph dedicated to Chechen children in Poland who were the victims of war, ascertained that “the hitherto research conducted in Poland has principally been relevant to refugee children and their problems, while it has failed to include the problems of children” (Januszewska, 2010, p. 9). The pioneering research into the experience of war suffered by children and young people in Poland is the work of Józef Ciembroniewicz (1877–1929), who in 1919 published a work

documenting the experiences of children afflicted by World War I (Ciembroniewicz, 1919). With a broader scope, research into the war experiences of children continued after the end of World War II. The scientific output of Maria Kaczyńska (1946), K. Jedlewska (1947), Stefan Baley (1947), and Ludwik Bandura (2004) should be mentioned here. All these studies were mostly an analysis of the result of the war, paying particular attention to trauma, which later came to be named post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychological Association.

The research in question applied to Polish children, whereas children and young people who were minors as well as war refugees first arrived in Poland in the 1950s. From 1948 to 1960, 3,725 Greek and Macedonian children arrived in Poland (Januszewska, 2010, p. 88). Poland also provided shelter for approximately 2,000 Korean children, who in 1958 returned to North Korea (Januszewska, 2010, p. 91). No papers about their education or adaptation to the new environment have been written to date.

The most recent research regards the children of immigrants who arrived in our country after 1989. It should nevertheless be stated that the restricted scope of this research reflects the small scale of the phenomenon. This subject has been studied by the already-mentioned Edyta Januszewska and Urszula Markowska-Manista (2017), as well as Valentina Todorovska-Sokolovska (2009); Krystian Barzykowski, Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Daniel Dzida, Joanna Grzymała-Moszczyńska, and Magdalena Kosno (2013); and Paweł Zieliński (2010), among others; there are also handbooks for teachers working with minor war refugees (*Inny w polskiej szkole*, 2010). As stated by Januszewska and Markowska-Manista (2017, p. 49), the majority of research into foreign school attendees has been local in nature, and principally relevant to Warsaw and the areas adjacent to it, where the majority of the populations of immigrants are concentrated. Nowhere but in the capital are there centers supporting these individuals in adapting to the new environment. In 2016, the Team for the Education of Foreign Children was established as a unit of the Office of Education of the Capital City of Warsaw; active non-governmental organizations there include the Foundation for Social Diversity

and Rescue Foundation, the Polish Migration Forum, and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Januszewska & Markowska-Manista, 2017, pp. 43–44).

Research into children afflicted by war, for that very reason, has a long tradition in Poland; this tradition is principally connected with Polish children who were victims of the First and Second World Wars. The research has been principally psychological and has focused on war trauma. Only the most recent research, commencing in the 1990s, included the aspect of educating minor war refugees. Such research has principally been connected with the arrival in Poland of refugee children from Chechnya, then ravaged by war, though it pertained to only a small number of school attendees and was principally restricted to Warsaw. It is therefore possible to ascertain that the state of research, and of knowledge relevant to the needs of school attendees fleeing from war – and the profile of teachers' work with such pupils – is not satisfactory in our country. To a certain degree, it is compensated for by broad research into multicultural and intercultural education. In the current core curriculum for preschool education, among the 17 tasks of preschools set out in the Ordinance of the Ministry of National Education of 2017, the last two refer to the need to prepare preschool attendees to participate in the life of the multicultural world. The tasks in question are “organizing classes – in accordance with needs – making it possible for a child to become acquainted with the culture and language of a national or an ethnic minority, or with a regional language” and “creating educational situations conducive to fostering in a child an interest in a modern foreign language, and also interest in learning about other cultures” (“Ordinance,” 2017, points 17 and 18).

Methodological proposals for completing these tasks in integrated education can be found. It is recommended to turn to Arkabus (2017) for an extensive list of selected literature on the subject and to Smoter and Smoter (2017); the latter article refers to the solutions currently being applied – or not applied, though recommended – in Polish education to make it possible for school attendees to perform well in a diverse world. The authors paid attention to best practices such as storytelling, encompassing the intercultural experiences of teachers and pupils into

educational interactions, and using fables that are common to many cultures. The application of so-called Persona Dolls during classes is also interesting from a cognitive perspective (Smoter & Smoter, 2017).

In the context of completing the tasks of multicultural education as formulated by the Ministry of National Education and Sport, it is justified to become acquainted with the opinion of ECEC teachers on this very subject. Research amongst Silesian preschool teachers, as well as those employed in Białystok and Wrocław, has recently been conducted by Twardzik (2018, pp. 218–230). The majority of the surveyed teachers expressed the conviction that it was justifiable to introduce intercultural content into the curriculum of nursery school education. The respondents introduced the content in question and used such materials as *Mały Europejczyk* [Little Europeans], *Ja i inni* [Myself and others], *Kolorowe dzieci* [Colorful children], *Projekt e-twinningowy – Pszczółka Maja dookoła świata* [E-twinning Project – Maya the Bee Travels around the World], and *Bajki Świata* [Tales of the World] (Twardzik, 2018, p. 223). The research demonstrated that the principal difficulty for a preschool education teacher introducing material within intercultural education is to find the balance between activities intended to develop both global and national culture in those under their care. The teachers in question seek the golden mean which would avoid both the trap of cosmopolitanism and of nationalism.

Ready scenarios for intercultural classes are provided by handbooks on methodology and magazines supporting preschool teachers, such as *Wychowanie w Przedszkolu* and *Bliżej Przedszkola*. In the course of preparing and conducting these classes, the findings of researchers working on children's development, the profile of the teaching process at the first stage of education, and intercultural pedagogy are all taken under consideration. Emphasis is placed on such objectives as developing the personal identity of a child, making the child proud and respectful of their own culture, and developing an attitude of openness towards and interest in different cultures (Kałuba-Korczak, 2016, p. 5).

As mentioned above, research into multi- and intercultural education, to a certain degree, compensates for the lack of knowledge and

ready solutions for supporting child refugees afflicted by war; nevertheless, the previous research does identify their specific needs, nor does it provide ECEC teachers with the appropriate competences. In this context, it seems justifiable to tap into research conducted in foreign countries and the solutions developed within.

Foreign Research Into the Education of Minor War Refugees

The phenomenon of war refugees is a common one in the contemporary world, and its negative impact is very frequently seen in young children. In accordance with the data on global demographics, between 2016 and 2018 alone, 32 million children were forced from their homes because of a war or other kind of armed conflict (Murray, 2019, p. 3); the children in question were principally from Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, and Myanmar.

The first forms of assistance of a receiving country are not aimed directly at children, but rather at parents. A great deal of research, for that very reason, addresses the question of how to help a family of refugee children function in their new environment and to regain balance in performing basic functions. It is emphasized that, even before families of refugee children become able to provide their children with psychosocial support, they have to see to their own basic needs. The families of refugee children are in need of assistance when it comes to food, accommodation, and clothing; only later will they require the services of interpreters and/or translators, financial assistance, language classes, help in finding a job and placing their children in school, and medical care (Betancourt et al., 2013; Pejic et al., 2017).

Educational needs, therefore, are of secondary importance; nevertheless, they are of principal significance from the point of view of the child. They are relevant as well to collaboration between preschool institutions and the parents of children refugee. For instance, the research of Johannes Lunneblad (2017) on the strategies of teachers in Sweden working with the parents of refugee children indicates two solutions: the first

encompasses reflective and flexible methods of cultural support and reinforcement, whereas the other refers to imposing the standards of Swedish nursery school on parents. In turn, Cherie S. Lamb (2020) ascertained from research amongst the families of refugee children staying in Australia that the receiving country must undertake to assist them in maintaining their own identity by protecting the language of refugee children and providing teachers who are trained in multicultural education and the mechanisms of trauma and preventing and fighting discrimination. The families of refugee children will therefore be better equipped to exert a positive influence on their own children and to support them in overcoming the trauma connected with exile.

A great deal of research is focused on war trauma. Although there is published evidence of the influence of war and conflict on older children, there is no research relevant to younger children. One of the relevant challenges is the problem of including refugee children in research. In the course of collecting data relevant to their situation, it is crucial to establish contact with them, which is difficult because their verbal skills and cognitive development are not very advanced; another problem may be a language barrier (Laxton et al., 2021; Gaywood et al., 2020).

When children experience trauma, it has a negative influence during the so-called sensitive periods of physical and cognitive development. An early trauma causes a lack of balance in the system of reacting to stress, which is responsible for cognitive functions and physiological processes. A trauma experienced in early childhood hinders the development of the brain, principally in the areas responsible for cognitive functions and for regulating emotions and behavior, which exerts its influence on attention, learning, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving. Living in areas ravaged by war entails a great deal of extreme experiences, such as missing food and sleep, witnessing violence and death, having to look at dead bodies and injured people, and experiencing the difficulties of travelling by overcrowded means of transport (Murray, 2019).

Being relocated to a receiving country involves new stressors. Children refugees have to learn a new culture and a new language. They frequently experience social isolation and discrimination. Being a child

refugee may encompass being separated from the members of one's own family. Even if the latter does not occur, the lack of permanent accommodation and financial difficulties are common. The stressful conditions of living in a country receiving refugee children frequently result in fear, anger, sadness, and a lack of prospects among refugee children. Minors deprived of care and fleeing a war or conflict zone encounter other stressful factors, such as being forced to work, being kidnapped and exploited by human traffickers and/or drug smugglers, prostitution, having their property stolen, prolonged stays in centers for asylum-seekers, and a permanent fear of being deported (Murray, 2019).

In the case of children struggling against war trauma, we observe sorrow, depression, fear, and brusqueness. Emotional states they experience include an elevated level of anxiety, changes in the reaction of agitation, intrusive thoughts, and avoidant behavior. As far as physical symptoms are concerned, these include stomach aches, headaches, leg cramps, breathing difficulties etc., which cannot be explained strictly by the medical aspect. For a great deal of refugee children afflicted by war, the principal source of depression and anxiety is loneliness and the lack of meaningful and pleasant activities in everyday life (Bhutta et al., 2016). In this context, the research conducted by Anne Wihstutz in German centers for refugee children is relevant. After observing families with children staying there, she arrived at the conclusion that refugee children need contact with other children, and that they initiate play that will satisfy their social needs. This is their remedy to overcome war trauma (Wihstutz, 2020). Thus, children from centers for refugee children ought to be able to access the education available in a given country – this is a method for avoiding social exclusion as well as overcoming war trauma. This fact has also been indicated by Ankie Vandekerckhove and Jeroen Aarssen (2020), who emphasized the indispensability of including refugee children in the systems of preschool education in receiving countries and providing them with the assistance of highly-qualified teaching personnel who are acquainted with their specific needs.

In the literature on the subject, we find references to the conception of Erik Erikson (1950), who concluded that proper development in infancy

and early childhood is dependent on the intensity of contrastive feelings. He differentiated between three crucial pairs of binary emotions: trust–distrust, autonomy–shame/doubt, and initiative–guilt. With the application of this conception, Murray (2019) developed the profile of the personal development of a child depending on age and a single dominant emotion (see Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of the psychophysical development of refugee children according to the conception of Erik Erikson

Stage	Conflict	Important actions	Psychosocial outcomes	Educational outcomes
Infancy (0-18 months)	Trust vs. mistrust	Receive predictable and reliable care	Trust is determined by providing care – the situation of war means that mistrust dominates and the feeling of doubt increases	Trust exerts influence on the correct development of language, and means better developed social and educational competences
Early childhood (1.5-3 years)	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Assert independence (e.g. make decisions)	The development of autonomy matching the expectations and standards means that a child feels safe A lack of success triggers the loss of confidence and shame – low self-evaluation and low self-esteem	Shame and the loss of confidence decreases motivation
Preschool (3-5 years)	Initiative vs. guilt	Exploration initiative activities with others	When initiative dominates, it fosters the sense of purpose; when the feeling of guilt is stronger, childhood is permeated with the lack of interest and the lack of self-confidence	The loss of enthusiasm, the loss of self-confidence, and / or guilt prevents one from being willing to study and learn new things, to investigate
Early middle childhood years (6-8 years)	Industry vs. inferiority	Develop confidence and competence	Social success or the sense of maladjustment	A negative attitude to school and developing abilities required in the further course of life renders it difficult to become an accomplished individual

Source: (Murray, 2019, p. 6)

Another aspect of research connected with minor war refugees in ECEC institutions is the preparation of teachers. Researchers are convinced that education and teachers play a crucial role in situations of crisis and

that teachers are good guides for the families of refugee children in the new social reality (Betancourt et al., 2013; Kovinthan, 2016). Simultaneously, it is pointed out that teachers frequently feel unprepared for supporting a child who has experienced difficult times in life, connected with war, terrorism, poverty, or natural disasters, for instance (Alisic, 2012; Reinke et al., 2011). In accordance with the research conducted by Sabri Dogan and Colette Dollarhide (2021), the need for additional training on working with the children of immigrants is also relevant to the employees of the school supervision system in the USA.

John Murray (2019) is another researcher who raised the problem of preparing preschool and early-school teachers for working with minors who are war refugees. He concentrates his attention on the need to provide teachers with knowledge on wartime immigration and to define the emotional, social, and educational needs of children prior to, during, and after experiencing a disaster. In his conclusion, he includes recommendations for ECEC teachers and centers that train them in supporting refugee families and children. In his opinion, is it important that preschool teachers understand why they ought to work on the psychosocial problems of refugee children, and why they ought to diagnose their needs. They should be acquainted with the nature of the psychosocial problems experienced by refugee children, because these problems influence the child's ability to concentrate and learn, as well as to interact with their classmates.

The scope of the required psychosocial support will differ depending on the individual situation of the child refugee and on their ability to cope with trauma. A great deal of resistant refugee children most likely recover after their principal psychosocial needs have been met. Other refugee children will require more specialist support from qualified professionals (Murray, 2019).

At the beginning of the 21st century, in England, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, a project named "Children Crossing Borders" was implemented for the benefit of refugee children in ECEC institutions in these countries. One of the crucial findings was that the parents of refugee children expected their children to be permitted to enter ECEC

institutions; in addition, teachers were found to frequently face a dilemma of whether to react to the unacceptable cultural behaviors of parents and strictly follow their pedagogical beliefs and principles without facilitating the education of the refugee children. The research indicated that bicultural employees play the crucial role rather than cultural mediators and interpreters/translators; parents noted that such employees are a rarity in the institutions of early childhood care. Again, it was confirmed that teachers are not prepared to cope with the challenges connected with working with refugees who have only recently arrived in the receiving country (Tobin, 2020).

A methodical proposition for working with children who have experienced trauma was developed by Karen Capo, Lori Espinoza, Jordan Khadam-Hir, and Debra Paz (2019). As the starting point, the authors selected the conception of Greenman (2005), which indicates four pillars of the safety of a child: people, place, routine, and ritual. The first element of building an environment conducive to the well-being of a child is constituted by adults. Good contact with an adult is important in the life of a child and forms a solid foundation for proper psychosocial development. When faced with doubt and confusion, little children seek shelter in the arms of adults whom they trust, or they ask the adults for help in understanding the world surrounding them. Stability and support are provided, first and foremost, by parents, teachers, and other guardians. Teachers may support children by spending time with them. In nursery school, this goal is facilitated by playing, in the course of which children express their feelings through art or while experiencing the joy of creating something new out of dough, plasticine, or another material. Teachers convince children that their words and artifacts created through manual activity are important. Children come to believe that what they think, feel, and experience are important and that they should share these thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other people.

The second element is *place*. In the context of preschool education, this word refers to arranging the classroom space appropriately. Teachers are encouraged to plan plays, art, sensory experiences, and the classes connected with them so as to provide children with the possibility to express

feelings and recreate experiences. It is recommended to establish cozy places with pillows/cushions, rocking chairs, dough to play with, and other materials which help children enjoy a temporary solitude and rest when needed. Not only do these silent zones satisfy the need to be separated from the group, but they also encourage the individual to regulate their emotions on their own. This ability is also developed through literature for children, broaching the subjects of separation and reunion or overcoming difficulties, for instance. It helps children become acquainted with their fears or anxiety and to overcome them.

The third category delineated by Greenman is *routine*. Restoring the regular and routine activities of everyday life is one of the most important forms of supporting children who have experienced the destruction of their former world. Children need parents – but also teachers – to provide them with a fixed and permanent framework of functioning, which makes it possible for them to regain trust in human beings and emotional stability and to become acquainted with the country to which they have fled. In a classroom, this means that teachers are aware of the significance of daily routine, which restores the stability of the disrupted life of the child. This routine may encompass determining routine greetings and help when the parents drop off their children, using expressions or songs that signal when a certain activity is about to be followed by another, moving to another room or leaving a building, following the rules which govern meals, and playing music or singing lullabies while children are resting, among others. Consolidating the routine of everyday life is also facilitated by displaying picture-based schedules, which render the world a predictable place (Capo et al., 2019, pp. 21–22).

The final element is constituted by *rituals*. The author explains the difference between this category and that of routine in the following manner: whereas routine is focused on the structure of time, a ritual determines the moment when this routine becomes important emotionally. Everyday school rites, such as hugging or shaking hands after entering a classroom or singing songs specially selected for the morning, assist in making personal contact more meaningful while simultaneously fostering a sense of community. One of the recommended rituals in preschool

education is to read fables and short stories at a fixed time. The teacher (which also applies to parents) ought to

intentionally reserve specific times of the day to listen to children's stories, scribe their words, and provide time and space for young classmates to bring the stories to life through simple classroom dramatization. For children, storytelling and play are oftentimes intertwined; it is in watching the child at play that a teacher or parent glimpses the thinking of the child. Adults build and strengthen trusting relationships with children when they invite them to share the stories of their lives. In times of trauma, this is even more important. (Capo et al., 2019, p. 91)

One instance of implementing theory into practice is the program developed by the staff of Rice University in Houston, Texas. The premise behind its development was the traumatic experiences of children connected with Hurricane Harvey, which struck in 2005. The creators of the program concentrated on developing safe spaces in which children could share their experiences and fears of the past and current events and to work on them by means of telling stories. The following five traditional domains of activity in early childhood were taken into consideration: 1) dramatic play center, 2) block center/tabletop building area, 3) books as teaching tools, 4) open-ended art and sensory experiences, and 5) sand and water (Capo et al., 2019).

Household items and traditional materials for education and play in early childhood were used, being selected so that the children would be encouraged to perform or to verbally share the experiences which they might have had in the course of the traumatic event or afterwards. Items such as rescue boats and helicopters, cleaning tools and building materials, and characters from films, were selected so as to encourage the children to share their experiences of the disaster in an informal context. The suggested literature for children included books about emotions, the construction industry, water, rain and different aspects of nature. These were used to create a space for conversations about different stress-triggering

or traumatic events that were not connected with the hurricane. Teachers should nevertheless be careful so as not to provide children with an excess of materials and to bear in mind that their presence and willingness to talk is, after all is said and done, more important than any particular items, agents, or activities.

To recapitulate, the creators of the program concluded that the training system of ECEC teachers ought to encompass expertise and skills that prepare preschool teachers for working with children struggling with trauma. This claim is relevant to both the developmental psychology of a child and the particular techniques of supporting children after experiencing trauma. These contents, both in theoretical and practical aspects, may be provided as well by courses on child development, social/emotional learning, play, executive functioning, and literature for children (Capo et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The Polish ECEC system seems to be unprepared for working with minors who are also war refugees from Ukraine. Polish experiences with the education of refugee children, including those afflicted by war, are limited. In attempting to change this state of affairs and prepare the ECEC institutions for working with children from Ukraine, it is certainly recommended to tap into the theory of education (multicultural and intercultural), which is well developed in Poland; first and foremost, what is required is expertise and experience from foreign countries. This leads to the conclusion that refugee children from areas ravaged by war are at a substantial risk of psychosocial problems, which can afflict them for a long time. The teachers of preschool and early-school education may play a crucial role in assisting refugee children and their families, in diagnosing their psychosocial needs, and in applying the appropriate courses of action. The literature review leads to the conclusion that teachers ought to better understand the results of war and conflict for refugee children and that they ought to provide assistance for children. It is recommended

to complement the curriculum of teacher training programs with new content or to initiate special courses that will prepare teachers for working with school attendees who are child refugees. The courses or degree programs in question should encompass a more profound knowledge of the social/emotional development of young children and the significance of family, school, and social relationships, while taking into consideration the situation of child refugees – as well as war refugees, being a specific type – the processes of integration, equality and diversity, and the problems of early childhood. Internships should also be prepared for school attendees that would provide them with appropriate practical abilities and competences for working in a multicultural environment.

In summary, the priorities for supporting Ukrainian child refugees should concentrate on 1) meeting the principal needs of the families of refugee children, since this is indispensable if the child is to regain emotional balance as soon as possible, 2) developing a friendly environment for children in ECEC institutions in Poland, and 3) preparing the ECEC teaching staff for professional psychosocial intervention to assist child refugees and their families.

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