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Teachers' opinions on the education of Ukrainian refugee students (in Polish schools)

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The research objective was to explore Polish teachers' opinions on the form and conditions for optimizing the educational process of refugee students from Ukraine, as well as the difficulties related to broadly understood education.

Research methods: The study employed a scale created by the author, which covered seven areas: the optimal system and forms of education for refugee students from Ukraine, conditions for optimizing their education (including environmental adjustments), possible difficulties and demotivators, and the priority needs of refugee students. Additionally, the issue of teacher preparedness for working with refugee students was considered.

Keywords:

education of refugees,
teachers, refugees,
Polish education,
intercultural competence

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Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Teachers emphasized the necessity of smaller class sizes, psychological support, and access to interpreters as critical for optimizing educational outcomes for refugee students. They also pointed to challenges that refugee students face, such as language barriers and emotional distress, highlighting the need for specialized teacher training in intercultural sensitivity and trauma-informed methods. These findings underscore the growing recognition in the field of the need for inclusive and adaptive educational strategies.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Teacher training programs should prioritize intercultural competence and trauma-sensitive approaches to better prepare educators to support the unique needs of refugee students. Recommendations include integrating structured psychological support and linguistic resources within schools to foster a supportive learning environment in culturally diverse educational settings.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Ukraine, there has been a mass migration of Ukrainians, mainly women and school-age children, to Poland (Schmid, 2022). For Polish teachers, this has required additional effort to appropriately include these new students in the school system. Teachers have reported difficulties with student classification and assessment (Pietrusińska and Nowosielski, 2022) (56.5%), determining educational goals (55.8%), communication with students (37.5%), adapting Ukrainian students to the Polish education system (27%), and addressing differences in standards and principles of child-rearing (30%) (Pyżalski et al., 2022).

In many cases, teachers were unsure how to develop the educational potential, interests, abilities, and opportunities of refugee students. Often, familiar and proven teaching methods turned out to be ineffective or inadequate when working with students from different cultural backgrounds (Markowska-Manista, 2016), particularly those who had experienced war trauma (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

A study conducted by Prentice and Ott (2021) shows that teachers working with refugee students rely on both personal and professional experience. They often depend more on informal, ad hoc support from colleagues than on formal training. Many scholars highlight that teachers

and other school staff play an important role in shaping the educational experience of refugee students across various countries (Roxas, 2011; Prentice & Ott, 2021; McDiarmid, Durbeej, Sarkadi & Osman, 2022). Teachers focus on creating opportunities for children and teenagers to share their personal stories, which significantly affects their sense of well-being in school (McDiarmid, Durbeej, Sarkadi & Osman, 2022). Teachers also find it easier to work with and show more positive attitudes toward refugee students if they have previous experience with children from other cultures (Prentice, 2023; Cooc & Kim, 2023). However, 96% of the teachers surveyed by Pyżalski et al. (2022) reported having had no prior contact with students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

A survey conducted among Polish teachers prior to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine shows that respondents recognized various benefits of teaching students with migration experience; for example, greater opportunities for individualized work with students, stronger bonds with learners, more adaptive methods and forms of instruction, and an appreciation of students' potential and engagement without the pressure of formal assessment (Mikulska, 2019). However, several months after the initial influx of Ukrainian students, a shift in Polish teachers' attitudes toward refugee students can be observed. Many teachers are returning to previously established teaching patterns and treating students from Ukraine the same as their Polish peers. As a result, the focus has returned to the implementation of the core curriculum and meeting general educational needs. Teachers and other school employees conclude that the school community is still learning how to adapt to multiculturalism and is facing various challenges in the process (Tędziągolska et al., 2022).

Research objective

The research objective was to explore the opinions of Polish teachers regarding the form and conditions for optimizing the educational process of refugee students from Ukraine, as well as the difficulties related to broadly understood education. The study included teachers who began

working with Ukrainian students after the outbreak of the war or who had previously taught migrant students from Ukraine. It also investigated differences across educational stages, as children and adolescents face different developmental challenges. Teenagers require higher-level communication, and the language barrier is frequently cited, also by Italian teachers, as a major obstacle in the education of Ukrainian students (Parmigiani et al., 2023). Adolescents are also in the process of identity formation and tend to be more aware of linguistic and cultural differences (Mehri, 2022). Moreover, the adaptation process is often more difficult for teenagers than for younger children (Zapolska et al., 2019).

Method

The study employed a custom-designed Likert scale questionnaire titled *Opinions on the education of refugee students from Ukraine*. It included seven thematic areas, each represented by a set of specific statements. These covered forms of education for refugee students, conditions for optimizing the educational process (including environmental adaptations), potential challenges and demotivators, and teacher preparedness to work with refugee students. The selection of these areas was based on a review of previous research (Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022; Pyżalski et al., 2022; Markowska-Manista, 2016; Nazaruk et al., 2024), in which these themes were discussed in various contexts.

Participants responded to each statement using a scale from 5 (definitely yes) to 1 (definitely no). To present the results more clearly, the response categories were grouped into three broader categories: negative assessment (definitely not, no), neutral assessment (difficult to say), and positive assessment (definitely yes, yes). The survey also included an open-ended response option.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of [University name anonymized]. Data collection took place over two months (December 2022 to January 2023). A random sample of 2,100 schools was selected from the online database of the Register of Schools and Educational Institutions (<https://rspo.gov.pl>). These schools were contacted via email, which included information about the study's objective and topic, confirmation of ethical approval, and a link to the online questionnaire hosted on the Google platform. The emails also requested that school principals forward the information to all teachers working with Ukrainian students.

Among the 2,100 school principals contacted, 418 responded to the email, indicating that the request would be forwarded to their teaching staff. Thirty-four principals replied that there were no Ukrainian refugee students in their schools or that the number was so low that very few teachers had any contact with them. This group of principals concluded that their staff lacked the necessary knowledge and experience to participate in the study.

The study sample ultimately consisted of 852 teachers who completed the survey. The respondents represented various levels of the Polish education system: 238 teachers worked in early primary education (grades 1–3), 414 taught upper primary students (grades 4–8), and 238 were employed in secondary schools. A substantial majority of the surveyed teachers (684) reported having Ukrainian students in their classrooms at the time of the study. No respondents were employed at Ukrainian schools operating in Poland. The survey did not include specific questions regarding prior participation in professional training related to teaching students with migration backgrounds.

All teachers who took part in our study were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that all responses would remain completely anonymous. The data were analyzed using Statistica (version 13). A one-way ANOVA was conducted, grouping participants by the level of education they taught. This was followed by a post-hoc test (Fisher's NIR). The significance level (p) was set at 0.05.

Results

Most teachers (Table 1) supported in-person teaching for refugee students in Polish schools. At the initial stage of education, they tended to favor the use of preparatory classes, viewing them as a helpful transitional space before students joined mainstream classes with their Polish peers. This approach was likely seen as a way to ease students into the new system while meeting their individual needs.

In contrast, other forms of education were less widely endorsed. Only 45.72% of teachers supported the option of online learning through the Ukrainian educational system, and 47.65% were in favor of minority schools where Ukrainian was the primary language of instruction. Even fewer (39.69%) approved of placing refugee students directly into mainstream Polish schools where Polish was the only language of instruction. These results suggest a general preference among educators for gradual integration supported by face-to-face interaction, rather than immediate full inclusion or remote learning alternatives.

Table 1. Opinions of teachers on the optimal system for the education of refugee students from Ukraine

Education of refugee students from Ukraine	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
Online in the Ukrainian system of education	negative	195	23.52	3.34	1.29
	neutral	255	30.76		
	positive	379	45.72		
Face-to-face in a Polish school with Polish as the language of instruction	negative	283	34.14	3.07	1.28
	neutral	217	26.18		
	positive	329	39.69		
Face-to-face in a Polish school in a preparatory class and then in a class with Polish students	negative	96	11.58	4.03	1.14
	neutral	112	13.51		
	positive	621	74.91		

Education of refugee students from Ukraine	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
Face-to-face in a Polish school for an ethnic minority with Ukrainian as the language of instruction	negative	242	29.19	3.33	1.37
	neutral	192	23.16		
	positive	395	47.65		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

**Table 2. Opinions of teachers on the optimal conditions
for the education of students from Ukraine**

Optimal education of refugee students from Ukraine means	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
smaller class sizes	negative	67	8.08	4.37	1.05
	neutral	80	9.65		
	positive	682	82.27		
assistant teacher	negative	74	8.93	4.42	1.06
	neutral	108	13.03		
	positive	646	77.93		
special teaching aids (e.g., school textbooks in Ukrainian)	negative	125	15.08	3.93	1.19
	neutral	143	17.25		
	positive	561	67.67		
special classroom arrangements (e.g., a row of tables enabling eye contact between students or ensuring a seat near the teacher)	negative	236	28.47	3.33	1.26
	neutral	202	24.37		
	positive	391	47.17		
providing psychological and pedagogical support	negative	21	2.53	4.52	0.77
	neutral	59	7.12		
	positive	749	90.35		
ongoing presence of a Ukrainian language interpreter	negative	157	18.94	3.67	1.22
	neutral	200	24.13		
	positive	427	56.94		

Optimal education of refugee students from Ukraine means	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
access to a Ukrainian language interpreter when necessary	negative	69	8.32	4.17	1.03
	neutral	105	12.67		
	positive	655	79.01		
use of software applications (e.g., mobile phones) with a language translator function	negative	74	8.93	4.17	1.09
	neutral	109	13.15		
	positive	646	77.93		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

With regard to the question of optimal conditions for the education of refugee students (Table 2), the respondents identified psychological and pedagogical support as the most crucial element, with 90.35% selecting it as a key factor. This strong consensus reflects an awareness of the emotional and developmental needs of students who have experienced displacement. Other significant conditions included smaller class sizes (82.27%), which teachers likely saw as a way to provide a more individualized approach, and the availability of a Ukrainian interpreter in the classroom (79.01%), which would facilitate communication and ease students' adjustment to a new learning environment. Additionally, 77.93% of teachers emphasized the value of having an assistant teacher present to offer direct support to refugee students. The same proportion (77.93%) recognized the usefulness of translation tools, such as mobile applications, to bridge language barriers and enhance understanding during lessons.

In terms of preparation for working with refugee students (Table 3), the majority of teachers expressed a need for targeted professional development. Most notably, 76.84% reported a desire for training related to supporting students who have experienced trauma, loss, or other difficult life events. A substantial proportion (69.96%) also saw the importance of acquiring skills to teach Polish as a foreign language. In contrast, fewer respondents considered it important to pursue further education on multicultural issues (40.41%) or to learn the Ukrainian language

(41.01%), suggesting a stronger emphasis on direct instructional strategies rather than broader cultural or linguistic competencies.

Table 3. Respondents' opinions on teacher preparation for working with refugee students from Ukraine

Teachers working with refugee students from Ukraine should have the opportunity	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
to take a Ukrainian language course	negative	253	30.52	3.25	1.32
	neutral	236	28.47		
	positive	340	41.01		
to complete training or studies in teaching Polish as a foreign language	negative	103	12.42	3.95	1.12
	neutral	146	17.61		
	positive	580	69.96		
to do a postgraduate course on interculturality	negative	256	30.88	3.17	1.21
	neutral	238	28.71		
	positive	335	40.41		
to take part in courses and training sessions on migration from Ukraine	negative	185	22.32	3.48	1.18
	neutral	209	25.21		
	positive	435	52.47		
to attend courses and training sessions on working with students with difficult experiences (trauma, loss)	negative	71	8.56	4.09	1.01
	neutral	121	14.60		
	positive	637	76.84		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

According to the teachers surveyed (Table 4), the most substantial obstacles faced by refugee students included taking competence tests (80.94%), learning the Polish language (73.70%), and acquiring knowledge in other school subjects (77.20%). These difficulties likely stemmed from both linguistic barriers and the need to adapt quickly to a new and unfamiliar educational system. A substantial number of teachers (71.77%) also noted that understanding teachers' instructions posed a considerable

obstacle for refugee students, which draws attention to the importance of clear communication and language support in the classroom.

In contrast, challenges related to the social aspects of school life were perceived as less pressing. Only 30.64% of respondents believed that knowing how to spend breaks between lessons was a major difficulty, and 33.78% pointed to building positive relationships with teachers as a concern. These results suggest that while academic and language-related issues were at the forefront of teachers' concerns, social integration was seen as comparatively less problematic, perhaps because it was assumed to improve over time as students became more familiar with their environment.

Table 4. Difficulties encountered by refugee students from Ukraine, according to Polish teachers

It is difficult for refugee students from Ukraine to	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
integrate with peers	negative	238	28.71	3.41	1.24
	neutral	145	17.49		
	positive	446	53.80		
build positive relationships with teachers	negative	399	48.13	2.85	1.22
	neutral	150	18.09		
	positive	280	33.78		
learn Polish	negative	84	10.13	4.00	0.99
	neutral	134	16.16		
	positive	611	73.70		
learn other subjects	negative	57	6.88	4.17	0.96
	neutral	132	15.92		
	positive	640	77.20		
spend free time at school (e.g., during breaks)	negative	377	45.48	2.79	1.21
	neutral	198	23.88		
	positive	254	30.64		

It is difficult for refugee students from Ukraine to	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
understand teachers' instructions	negative	89	10.74	3.95	0.99
	neutral	145	17.49		
	positive	595	71.77		
perform individual tasks during lessons	negative	109	13.15	3.85	1.06
	neutral	168	20.27		
	positive	552	66.59		
perform group tasks during lessons	negative	183	22.07	3.46	1.08
	neutral	222	26.78		
	positive	424	51.15		
do homework assignments	negative	102	12.30	3.81	1.04
	neutral	195	23.52		
	positive	532	64.17		
take competence (knowledge and skills) tests	negative	50	6.03	4.26	0.94
	neutral	108	13.03		
	positive	671	80.94		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

According to the teachers surveyed (Table 5), the most important needs of refugee students included feeling safe (96.86%), understood (95.50%), and accepted (95.66%) within the school environment. These emotional and psychological aspects were likely seen as fundamental to students' ability to learn and adapt in a new educational and cultural context. Teachers also emphasized the importance of providing a sense of peace and order (94.57%), which could help reduce anxiety and create a stable learning atmosphere for children who may have experienced displacement and trauma.

In addition to these basic needs, educators pointed to the necessity of ensuring access to psychological support (90.71%) and regular Polish language lessons (87.94%). These forms of support were viewed as essential for both the well-being and academic success of refugee students, as they

helped them process past experiences and engage more fully with the school curriculum.

Table 5. Priority needs of refugee students from Ukraine, according to Polish teachers

It is important for refugee students from Ukraine to	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
learn the Polish language	negative	27	3.26	4.51	0.82
	neutral	73	8.81		
	positive	729	87.94		
feel accepted	negative	6	0.72	4.74	0.57
	neutral	30	3.62		
	positive	793	95.66		
be understood (e.g., communication, understanding situations)	negative	4	0.48	4.77	0.53
	neutral	25	3.02		
	positive	800	96.50		
be able to obtain psychological support	negative	17	2.05	4.57	0.73
	neutral	60	7.24		
	positive	752	90.71		
have a sense of peace and order	negative	7	0.84	4.69	0.60
	neutral	38	4.58		
	positive	784	94.57		
have a sense of security	negative	5	0.60	4.83	0.47
	neutral	21	2.53		
	positive	803	96.86		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

Teachers emphasized that a well-organized school environment played a crucial role in helping refugee students feel comfortable not only in their classrooms but also in the broader school setting (Table 6). In their view, a supportive environment was shaped primarily by interpersonal factors –

most notably, the positive attitudes of both peers (98.07%) and teachers (98.55%). Equally important was the feeling of being understood by others (91.44%), which contributed to a sense of belonging and emotional security.

In addition to social support, structural elements were also considered vital. Transparent school rules and structured daily timetables (95.05%) were seen as beneficial for newly arrived students, providing a sense of stability in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. Teachers recognized that refugee students often faced numerous challenges, including adapting to a new education system and coping with the psychological impact of displacement.

To meet the diverse needs and accommodate the learning capabilities of these students, teachers pointed to the importance of adapting instructional methods. Key strategies included allowing more time for students to process information and respond (89.38%), breaking down educational content into smaller, more manageable segments (84.44%), using visual teaching aids, including communication tools (88.90%), and maintaining smaller class sizes (84.92%). These adjustments were viewed as essential for creating inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Table 6. Characteristics of a learning environment supportive of refugee students from Ukraine, according to Polish teachers

A learning environment supportive of refugee students from Ukraine ensures	Opinions	N	%	M	SD
transparent rules and a daily schedule	negative	10	1.21	4.64	0.63
	neutral	31	3.47		
	positive	788	95.05		
small class sizes	negative	37	4.46	4.38	0.87
	neutral	88	10.62		
	positive	704	84.92		
presence of a person who speaks Ukrainian	negative	62	7.48	4.18	1.01
	neutral	137	16.53		
	positive	630	76.00		

A learning environment supportive of refugee students from Ukraine ensures	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
positive attitudes among peers	negative	2	-	4.79	0.47
	neutral	14	1.69		
	positive	813	98.07		
positive attitudes among teachers	negative	3	-	4.83	0.44
	neutral	9	1.09		
	positive	817	98.55		
use of teaching materials translated into Ukrainian	negative	67	8.08	4.07	1.01
	neutral	147	17.73		
	positive	615	74.19		
creating conditions to promote independence	negative	32	3.86	4.01	0.88
	neutral	200	24.13		
	positive	597	72.01		
additional time to process information and respond	negative	18	2.17	4.38	0.76
	neutral	70	8.44		
	positive	741	89.38		
understanding students' mental state	negative	10	1.21	4.53	0.70
	neutral	61	7.36		
	positive	758	91.44		
taking into account Ukrainian culture/customs	negative	48	5.79	4.11	0.92
	neutral	140	16.89		
	positive	641	77.32		
breaking down teaching content into smaller part	negative	28	3.38	4.26	0.82
	neutral	101	12.18		
	positive	700	84.44		
using visual aids, including communication tools	negative	21	2.53	4.40	0.77
	neutral	71	8.56		
	positive	737	88.90		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

Teachers also expressed concern about certain physical aspects of the school environment that could negatively impact refugee students' learning experiences (Table 7). In particular, they noted that overly noisy classrooms (77.56%) and large class sizes (82.63%) were not conducive to effective learning. These conditions were likely seen as demotivating and potentially overwhelming for refugee students who were already coping with the stress of adapting to a new educational system and language. These results underscore the importance of creating calm, structured, and manageable classroom environments to support the academic and emotional needs of refugee students.

Table 7. Physical barriers demotivating refugee students from Ukraine, according to Polish teachers

The following physical barriers demotivate refugee students from Ukraine:	Opinion	N	%	M	SD
noisy classroom (can cause anxiety)	negative	59	7.12	4.21	1.00
	neutral	127	15.32		
	positive	643	77.56		
large class sizes	negative	45	5.43	4.35	0.93
	neutral	99	11.94		
	positive	685	82.63		

Source: author's survey; Note: N – number of respondents; % – percentage; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

The ANOVA test revealed several significant differences based on the level of education at which the respondent teachers work:

- a) Regarding the opinion that employing an assistant teacher is necessary [$F(2,826) = 4.97, \eta^2 = .01, p = .007$] and the suggestion for special classroom arrangements [$F(2,826) = 3.49, \eta^2 = .01, p = .031$], the lowest average scores came from secondary school teachers, while the highest scores were reported by primary school teachers working with the youngest students (grades 1–3).