



Anna Żurek

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4216-3636>

University of Wrocław, Poland

anna.zurek@uwr.edu.pl

Katarzyna Stankiewicz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0554-4261>

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw, Poland

katarzyna.stankiewicz@uksw.edu.pl

On the way to integration? The education of children with diverse migration experiences in Polish schools

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The study aims (1) to analyze the main educational solutions for children with migration experience in Polish schools, with reference to academic literature and current legal regulations from the last ten years; and (2) to evaluate how these solutions meet the needs of specific groups of pupils with migration experience, with particular attention to integration-support strategies and the barriers encountered in this context.

Research methods: The study is based on a narrative literature review of selected academic publications, reports, and legal regulations from the last ten years concerning the education of children with migration experience, approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. The review was qualitative and intended to provide answers to research questions such as: What is the cultural diversity of Polish schools? What are the specific characteristics of the various groups of migrant pupils? What educational solutions are currently in place? How do they respond to the needs of diverse groups of migrant pupils? What support is provided for integration? What barriers to integration are posed by the adopted educational solutions?

Process of argumentation: The article begins by presenting Polish schools as culturally diverse environments formed by different groups

of children with migration experience. As a point of reference, selected acculturation strategies are then outlined and contextualized within the school setting. Next, the main educational solutions for children with migration experience implemented in Polish schools are described. A key section of the article analyzes the barriers to integration encountered by pupils with various migration experiences in the educational environment.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Polish schools are currently characterized by significant cultural diversity and host pupils with a wide range of migration experiences. The needs of these pupils, including integration needs, vary according to their individual experiences. Language skills – particularly proficiency in the language of instruction – are crucial for successful integration. The main barriers to education for pupils with migrant experience include linguistic, educational, and emotional challenges. The study offers an innovative perspective by linking diverse types of migration experience to existing educational solutions and examining their significance for the integration of students into both Polish schools and Polish society.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: There is considerable potential for integration through the inclusion of migrant pupils in mainstream classes; however, this may not be suitable for children with refugee backgrounds. Education in preparatory classes must be adapted to the specific needs of these pupils. The Polish education system requires changes toward becoming more inclusive and responsive to the individual needs and well-being of all children, with particular attention to the unique circumstances of pupils with migration experience.

Introduction

With the increasing diversity of Polish society – intensified by the influx of refugees following Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war near Poland's eastern border – Polish schools are also becoming more culturally diverse. This diversity now affects not only large urban centers and border regions, as it did before, but also defines the environment of virtually every educational institution. There is no doubt that education can function as a space for social inclusion, but this requires effective educational solutions. As Edyta Januszewska and Urszula Markowska-Manista emphasize, "inclusion implies a search for new strategies, solutions, and ways of educational work in a culturally heterogeneous school and – in the case of the presence of students belonging

to different cultures and nationalities – an intercultural opening of the school” (2017, pp. 12–13).

This signals the growing importance of the inclusive education model that underpins the approach to educating children with migration experience in Polish schools. This model assumes their inclusion in the system through participation in mainstream classes. Such an approach offers an opportunity to create a school environment that is more open and sensitive to the individual educational needs of pupils. At the same time, however, it poses significant challenges. In addition to attending mainstream classes, the Polish system also allows pupils with migration experience to be placed in so-called preparatory classes until they have acquired sufficient proficiency in the Polish language to learn effectively (for a maximum of two years). This may delay the integration process with their Polish peers.

This study aims to analyze the main educational solutions for children with diverse migration experiences in Polish schools and to evaluate how these solutions meet the needs of specific groups of pupils, with particular emphasis on strategies that support integration and the barriers encountered in this context. The article is a theoretical overview based on a narrative (traditional) literature review of Polish pedagogical and glottodidactic sources,¹ focusing on publications from the past decade.² It also includes a review of current legislation related to the education of children with migration experience in Poland. The analysis is qualitative and seeks to answer research questions such as: What is the cultural diversity of Polish schools? What are the specific characteristics of the diverse groups of migrant pupils? What educational solutions are currently in place? How do these solutions address the needs of diverse groups of

¹ This type of literature review allows for the flexible selection of sources based on the formulated research questions (Healey & Healey, 2023).

² The past decade has seen significant developments in the education of migrant children, including the introduction of preparatory classes and the rising number of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools. Additionally, the growing recognition of students from re-emigrant families points to evolving perspectives in the field, making recent literature particularly relevant.

migrant pupils? What support is provided for integration? What barriers to integration are created by the adopted educational solutions?

The first part of the article presents the diverse groups of pupils with migration experience in the context of the cultural diversity found in Polish schools. These groups are identified, among other factors, based on the nature of their migration experience. An outline of selected acculturation strategies relevant from an educational perspective is then provided. This forms the basis for discussing the main educational solutions for children with migration experience implemented in Polish schools. The analysis focuses on both the assumptions behind and the implementation of these solutions, with particular emphasis on the specific needs of different groups of pupils and the integration barriers that they face in the educational process. Conclusions drawn from this analysis may constitute a starting point for identifying solutions that are better tailored to the needs of various groups of children and that support the individualization of the educational process.

The cultural diversity of Polish schools

Polish schools are increasingly becoming spaces where students from various countries and cultural backgrounds come together. With each passing year, both this diversity and the challenges associated with intercultural encounters continue to grow. Diversity now applies not only to pupils but also to auxiliary staff and teachers (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2022). According to a 2023 report published by the Polish Supreme Audit Office, the number of foreign students attending Polish schools has increased nearly fivefold in recent years. As before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens currently make up the largest group of foreign pupils. In every fourth Polish school, there is at least one refugee pupil from Ukraine (NIK Report, 2023).

In addition to refugee children from Ukraine, other groups of pupils with migration experience also contribute to the cultural diversity of Polish schools. These groups are distinguished based on the type of migration

experience, which is influenced by the reason for the child's arrival in Poland and is often determined by the family's financial and social circumstances. Pupils also differ in terms of their country of origin, mother tongue, and the social and cultural capital of their parents (cf. Januszewska & Markowska-Manista, 2017; Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2018).

It is important to note that the group of pupils with refugee experience includes not only children from Ukraine but also those from other countries and various parts of the world.³ The refugee experience is typified by forced migration, high stress, uncertainty, a sense of temporariness, and a lack of informed decision-making by the migrants – all of which have implications for education. Additional burdens may include experiences of loss or mental health adversities stemming from traumatic events in their home countries, as well as the emotional strain of separation from loved ones and leaving their homeland (Krawczak, 2022, pp. 368–369).

In the case of Ukrainian children, particularly those who began attending Polish schools after 2022, their experience is defined by forced migration related to the refugee crisis, as opposed to the earlier wave of economic migration from Ukraine. However, this group also includes children from other countries and different regions of the world. In addition to refugee pupils, it is also necessary to acknowledge children from immigrant families, especially those of economic migrants whose families have settled in Poland by choice. In such cases, the decision to migrate – along with its direction – was made consciously by the parents and was most often motivated by economic factors (NIK Report, 2023).

Furthermore, the group of re-emigrant children constitutes a significant and complex category within the broader population of pupils with migration experience. Return migration refers to the phenomenon in which a family relocates to the parents' country of origin – Poland – after residing abroad for a certain period. This group is internally diverse and encompasses both children born outside of Poland and those born

³ After Ukrainians, the second-largest group consists of individuals from Belarus who are under international protection. Cf. www.migracje.gov.pl.

in the country who began their education in the Polish system but later continued it abroad due to their family's emigration and subsequent return. Many of these pupils experience a sense of cultural alienation upon "returning" to the Polish school system, particularly in relation to its institutional culture and norms. Although they typically demonstrate fluency in Polish in everyday communication, they often face greater challenges when engaging with the academic language required in educational contexts (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2023).

When addressing the topic of cultural diversity in schools, it is also important to consider two additional groups that contribute to this diversity: children from national and ethnic minorities and children from mixed relationships; that is, multicultural couples. The presence of the former is most noticeable in schools located in cultural borderlands, while multicultural families are more often found in larger urban centers. In such families, parents come from different cultural backgrounds and typically speak different native languages. In daily life, these heterogeneous cultural patterns often clash, posing challenges for children growing up in that environment. Children from multicultural families usually speak more than one language, and their cultural identity – due to influences from both parents – is complex. In the course of their upbringing, they are exposed to different cultural traditions and norms, which can facilitate their learning in a culturally diverse school setting.

In the case of both groups – minority and multicultural pupils – there is generally no experience of migration. Instead, these pupils possess enriched cultural identities, which are frequently linked to their development toward multilingualism (Komorowska, 2018, pp. 5–11). For this reason, they are excluded from the analysis presented in this article. While they are part of the Polish school system, all of these groups learn in mainstream classes alongside pupils of Polish origin, regardless of their diverse needs.

Acculturation strategies in the context of education and the needs of children

Integration can be understood as one of the acculturation strategies that describe the process of entering a new culture (Boski, 2009, pp. 525–541). This topic has been extensively researched and theorized, beginning with the work of John Berry (1997; see, e.g., Ward & Kus, 2012). Integration involves opening up to the new culture, while simultaneously respecting and maintaining one's culture of origin. In the school context, pupils enter a new environment, encounter a different school culture and education system, and build relationships with peers. A child's functioning in the school – also referred to as "educational integration" (Cerna, 2019) – marks the beginning of social integration and inclusion into Polish society.

It is important to emphasize that the concept of integration as described here, commonly used in the field of special education, closely aligns with the principles of inclusive education. Special education scholars stress that integration is a bidirectional process, the success of which depends not only on the child but also on the attitudes and actions of those who receive the child into the new educational environment. The key to this process is recognizing each child's individual needs and adapting the school system accordingly. As Katarzyna Nadachewicz and Małgorzata Bilewicz assert, "it is not the child who needs to change and adapt to the school system but vice versa: the school and the system must change to meet the individual needs of all children" (2020, p. 26). Failure to do so results in assimilation rather than genuine integration – an outcome confirmed by empirical studies conducted in selected Polish schools (Tędziągolska et al., 2024).

Another strategy that is also present in school practice is assimilation, which involves the rejection of the culture of origin in favor of the dominant culture in the country of migration. In such cases, the culture of origin is regarded as less valuable. The pupil fully adapts to the new conditions and expectations of the environment, believing this will help them succeed at school and avoid standing out from the majority. In the long

term, however, this can lead to the loss of cultural roots. Paradoxically, this strategy may also be implemented in mainstream classrooms under the guise of integration models for educating pupils with migration experience.

Research conducted as part of the MiCREATE project has shown that many teachers in Poland, both consciously and unconsciously, fail to recognize the specific needs of children with a migrant background (Kościółek, 2020, p. 203). The inclusion of children with diverse needs in mainstream education – commonly referred to as the “one-track model” – may inadvertently perpetuate a discriminatory environment, as pointed out by Jarosław Bąbka and Marta Nowicka (2017, p. 122). Teachers’ failure to consider students’ migration experiences, coupled with an overemphasis on language skills at the expense of recognizing students’ all-round potential, can result in assimilationist practices – even in mainstream classrooms (Kościółek, 2020, p. 606; Tędziagolska et al., 2024, p. 98).

Furthermore, an especially problematic strategy is separation, which has the effect of excluding the child from the mainstream culture and functioning of the school, as if he or she were outside the host community. The adoption of this strategy often stems from a desire to preserve the child’s cultural traditions and patterns, accompanied by a rejection of the host country’s culture and language, which are perceived as less valuable. This leads to a lack of motivation to learn in the Polish school system, particularly when it comes to developing language competences. It may be the result of negative experiences with peers in the host country or a lack of desire to stay long-term – factors that may vary depending on the type of migration experience. Preparatory classes are especially at risk of perpetuating this strategy⁴ (Majcher-Legawiec, 2022).

⁴ The strategy of marginalization has been intentionally excluded here, as it is the least common strategy among children with migration experience and falls outside the scope of this article.

Between mainstream, preparatory classes, and other educational solutions

Polish legislation allows for two approaches to the education of pupils who are not Polish citizens, as well as Polish citizens who have been educated in school systems of other countries (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2022, p. 3). The first approach assumes full immersion of pupils with migration experience into Polish language and culture through daily participation in mainstream classes and joint implementation of the core curriculum alongside Polish-speaking peers (cf. Regulation, 2017). According to this approach, regardless of their level of Polish language proficiency, pupils arriving from abroad take part in all lessons and have the right to attend additional Polish language classes and remedial lessons (Regulation, 2017, §§ 17–19). Learning Polish in a natural context and having daily contact with Polish-speaking classmates are undoubtedly advantages of this model.

However, given the considerable diversity among pupils with migration experience – their varying levels of Polish proficiency (or complete lack thereof) and their diverse linguistic and educational needs – this solution may be difficult to implement during the initial stage of their schooling. For many pupils, additional Polish lessons are insufficient, and teaching or learning Polish as a foreign language alongside the language used in subject instruction requires a great deal of effort from both pupils and teachers (Miodunka et al., 2018, pp. 113–115).

Another solution which is designed to help foreign and re-emigrant pupils learn Polish more quickly and follow the core curriculum at a level suited to their developmental and educational needs is instruction in preparatory classes (cf. Regulation, 2016; Regulation, 2023). The main objective of this approach is to prioritize the development of linguistic and communicative competencies in pupils with migration experience, in accordance with the framework program for Polish language courses for foreigners (Regulation, 2011).⁵ The functional presentation of linguistic

⁵ It is worth noting that this program was originally designed for adults, as discussed by Majcher-Legawiec (2022, p. 11).

and grammatical content, along with instruction in the social and conventional rules of language use – considering communicative situations and extra-linguistic context – is intended to enhance learners' motivation. In addition to learning the Polish language, foreign pupils are also expected to become familiar with aspects of life in Poland and Polish culture. Both linguistic and cultural knowledge are intended to help learners, among other things, adapt to new conditions and integrate into the local, i.e., school, community. The content of various subjects is taught to the extent that it matches learners' abilities, which in practice often means a significant reduction in the amount of content delivered due to language deficits (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2023).

The educational model implemented in preparatory classes is described in the literature as *separative* due to its exclusionary nature. From the point of view of potential linguistic (more hours devoted to learning Polish and the language of schooling) and psychological benefits (reduced acculturation stress), preparatory classes may seem like a favorable solution. However, when taking into account the social and cultural dimensions of this type of education, it must be noted that it fosters the isolation of foreign-born students from their Polish peers, the creation of linguistic and cultural "ghettos" among foreign pupils, and the emergence of hostile attitudes between both groups of children (cf. Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2022). Additional legal regulations regarding the educational support of refugee pupils from Ukraine have essentially clarified certain provisions concerning the length of Polish language instruction and the types of educational support available to this group of pupils – children who have experienced the trauma of war and have been forced to leave their home country – within the existing legal solutions (Act, 2022).

Considering the latest research findings (Tędziągolska et al., 2024), there is a need to critically assess and optimize the way preparatory classes operate. In addition to the positive aspects, such as refugee pupils' sense of security and the development of friendly relationships with peers from the same countries, negative aspects of the separation model of education for pupils with refugee experience have also been noted. These include limited integration with Polish peers, minimal exposure

to Polish "life," and a selective curriculum. As a result, preparatory classes have been described as "storehouses" where pupils learn very little. Preparatory classes should not be eliminated in schools that receive a large number of foreign children, given these pupils' emotional and linguistic needs and the organizational capacities of the institutions. An optimal solution appears to be a mixed model (not currently sanctioned by Polish law), which combines intensive Polish language instruction in preparatory classes with participation in selected mainstream classes that do not require a strong command of the language (e.g., music or physical education) (cf. Tędziągolska et al., 2024, pp. 27–28). There is no universal model for the language education of children with migration experience (Miodunka et al., 2018, pp. 120–123). Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses; therefore, it is necessary in each case to consider not only the child's age, previous language biography, and educational experience, but also their first language and type of migration experience (Dąbrowa, 2024, pp. 234–235).

For pupils from labor migrant families who plan to stay in Poland, joining mainstream classes appears to be the most beneficial. The same applies to re-emigrant pupils, who tend to adapt relatively quickly to their new environment, communicate well in Polish, and are often perceived as Polish children who have temporarily emigrated. These pupils typically require less support than foreign-born pupils, although they may still experience curricular gaps, vocabulary deficits in school subjects, or underdeveloped literacy skills in Polish. Nonetheless, preparatory classes seem to be particularly beneficial for children with refugee backgrounds who hope for a swift end to the war and a return to their home country. As several studies indicate, current educational solutions in Poland have notable limitations, particularly at the level of implementation. Jarosław Bąbka and Marta Nowicka rightly emphasize that the state's educational policy cannot be limited to defining only the legal framework for the inclusion of students with migration experience in Polish schools. It is vital to be aware of the current challenges related to teaching and learning Polish as a foreign or second language. Equally important is the need to individualize educational approaches so that they are tailored to the specific

needs of foreign students (2017, p. 136). Those responsible for crafting educational policy are currently managing this issue (see more on the website of the Polish Ministry of Education: www.gov.pl).

Barriers to the integration of pupils with migration experience

Developing an inclusive educational environment that meets the diverse needs of children with migration experience is a complex undertaking, which often runs up against numerous barriers. A lack of knowledge or an insufficient command of the Polish language not only hinders everyday communication with peers but also impedes the achievement of educational outcomes that are commensurate with a pupil's competencies and talents. For pupils with migration experience, this is not only a matter of communicating in Polish in daily interactions but, above all, of mastering the language of schooling, which often varies across subject areas (Seretny, 2024).

In addition to language barriers, there are educational obstacles that stem from differences in national curricula and the absence of a standardized pre-assessment of multilingual pupils' knowledge and school skills. Assessing the academic progress of pupils with migration experience is still a significant challenge for teachers in Polish schools (Tomasik, 2024, pp. 39–41). Some authors point to a lack of individualization in the educational process for these diverse groups. Teachers are often unprepared to select educational content and teaching methods appropriate to the pupils' level of language proficiency (Gębka-Wolak, 2019; cf. Baranowska, 2020; Gulińska, 2021).

Pupils with migration experience also face cultural barriers resulting from differences between their country of origin and their new host country. In the context of adjusting to a new school environment, acculturation stress emerges as a major challenge. These children may experience culture shock, which can be more intense when the cultural distance between their home culture and Polish culture is greater. This often leads to a sense of cultural alienation, which can manifest as social disconnection

in the classroom. A lack of peer acceptance and emerging cultural conflicts may aggravate these feelings (cf. Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2018).

Another type of barrier involves various psychological difficulties tied to cultural challenges, which can slow the effective integration of international pupils into their new school environment. The culture shock of moving to a new country can trigger feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, or even alienation. A lack of a sense of belonging may lead to frustration, decreased motivation to learn, and fear of rejection, which can result in pupils avoiding contact with Polish peers and thereby limiting their integration (cf. Dąbrowa, 2024).

The relevance of these barriers varies among specific groups of pupils with migration experience and poses numerous challenges for both the students and their teachers – and more broadly, for the educational system as a whole. Children from return migrant families, who often possess basic language skills and knowledge of Polish cultural norms acquired at home, tend to be best positioned to succeed in mainstream classes. However, both children and their re-emigrant parents may still experience difficulties related to orienting themselves in the education system and acclimating to school culture. These pupils, too, may experience acculturation stress and culture shock (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2023).

The challenges faced by pupils from labor-migrant families are often more severe and depend largely on the individual circumstances of the child and their family, including the country of origin, native language, and the extent of their preparation for relocating to Poland, particularly in terms of learning the Polish language. When it comes to the stress of interacting with peers, much depends on the cultural distance between the child's culture of origin and Polish culture, as well as on prevailing stereotypes about specific nationalities in Poland, which may lead to discrimination and cultural conflict. A pupil from a labor-migrant family may generally experience a smoother integration process if the parents have taken an active role in preparing for the move, securing housing in Poland, and supporting the child's language learning while still in the country of origin. Due to the clearly defined purpose and planned nature of the migration, such children often have a higher motivation to succeed

in Polish schools and integrate into the school environment compared to those with refugee experience.

In contrast, the refugee experience itself can significantly hinder the integration process. These children are often abruptly uprooted from their school environment and leave their country of origin under crisis conditions, with no prior preparation. They may not know if or when they will return. Many experience a deep longing for their homeland and a desire to return, even though this may not be possible in the foreseeable future. In such cases, the family's migration is forced and accompanied by intense stress and a sense of impermanence, which – as previously mentioned – can diminish the child's motivation to learn Polish and to acclimate to the new school environment. When compounded by potential mental health problems, successful integration becomes a considerable hurdle for this group of pupils. The barriers outlined above may arise irrespective of the educational approach adopted for children with migration experience. As already indicated, their impact varies across different groups of pupils. These should be understood as challenges that must be addressed not only by the children themselves, but also by Polish schools, teachers, and the host student community.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to present the main educational solutions for children with diverse migration experiences, giving particular attention to the specific needs of these groups, the integration process, and the barriers involved. The analysis was based on a review of relevant literature, including current legal regulations. Polish schools were presented as increasingly culturally diverse environments. Linguistic, educational, and psychological difficulties were identified as the main barriers to education for pupils with migration experience. While language proficiency – especially in the language of schooling – is considered essential for effective integration, it is not sufficient on its own. It is difficult to master a language without motivation, particularly when a child's future

at a given school or in Poland is uncertain. These barriers vary in relevance and impact across different groups of migrant pupils. At present, the greatest challenge for the Polish education system is the integration of refugee pupils, most of whom come from Ukraine, due to the specific needs resulting from their refugee experiences, the temporary nature of their stay in Poland, and the uncertainty surrounding their future.

The presence of integration barriers is independent of the educational model adopted. However, placing children with migration experience in mainstream classrooms offers far greater potential for integration than educating them exclusively in preparatory classes. Still, certain limitations of this approach have been highlighted. The choice of educational model should depend on the pupils' background, native language, emotional well-being, and plans for the future. In the case of larger groups of refugee pupils entering Polish schools, an initial period of education in preparatory classes is advisable. A mixed model – not yet implemented in Poland – that allows for a gradual introduction of children into the school community appears to be optimal.

Changing the education of children with migration experience to one that is more open, responsive to their needs, and integrative goes well beyond the scope of teaching Polish as a foreign or second language or leveling curriculum disparities. Instead, it represents a shift toward building a culturally diverse, open, and inclusive school environment.⁶ Inclusion, in this context, is understood not so much as merely acknowledging individual educational needs, but as valuing and embracing diversity. Moreover, it should involve actively drawing on this diversity within the educational process, in line with the model of “education for all,” which is sensitive to the risks of social exclusion (Nadachewicz & Bilewicz, 2020, p. 33).

In this way, the discourse shifts from framing the presence of migrant children as a challenge to be managed, to seeing their presence

⁶ It is worth noting that, in the context of Polish schools, legal regulations provide notable opportunities to adapt schoolwork and teaching to the individual needs of students. However, the difficulty lies in implementing these opportunities in everyday school practice (Gulińska, 2021). A detailed analysis of these limitations goes beyond the scope of this article.

as an opportunity for empowerment. This should be reflected in a deliberate effort to prepare schools to welcome pupils with diverse needs and to actively engage them in the integration process (Slany et al., 2022, pp. 127–138). Such an approach makes it possible to treat the presence of children with migration experience in the Polish school system as an opportunity that can foster gradual change in the system for the benefit of all students, geared toward, first and foremost, on supporting their individual potential and overall well-being.

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