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Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education

Socio-Cultural Inclusion/Integration
of Migrant and Refugee Children
at School



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of Migrant and Refugee Children
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Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education

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Editorial

Migration, driven by conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, has transformed European classrooms into spaces of refuge, resilience, and change. Since 2022, millions of people – mostly women and children – have fled the conflict in Ukraine in search of safety abroad. Schools, as the first point of integration for children, have taken on an essential and urgent role. The arrival of refugee students has brought significant educational challenges: language barriers, emotional trauma, curriculum discrepancies, and the need for additional resources. Teachers, school administrators, and educational communities have had to adapt rapidly to ensure not only access to education but also the genuine inclusion of these children in the school environment. This situation has underscored the need for a sensitive, flexible approach to education that prioritizes the well-being of all students.

Yet, alongside these difficulties, migration has also brought a powerful value: multiculturalism. Today more than ever, classrooms mirror the diversity of the world. Students from a variety of backgrounds coexist, learn, and grow together, enriching the educational experience with new languages, traditions, and perspectives. This cultural diversity not only broadens students' horizons but also strengthens key skills such as empathy, tolerance, and global citizenship. Far from being a hindrance, the presence of children from different nationalities in schools presents a unique opportunity to rethink our educational models. It invites us to build a more open, inclusive school system: one better equipped to meet the demands of our time.

In this issue, we explore how educational institutions are responding to the impact of migration and how they are turning diversity into a pedagogical asset. Ultimately, a school that welcomes and learns from difference is a school that builds the future.

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Thematic Articles



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Pedagogical discourse on educational management in wartime: The Ukrainian case

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this article is to present the theoretical foundations of educational management during wartime and to share the results of research on various aspects of school leadership in Ukraine. It focuses on practices necessary to sustain the educational process under wartime conditions, particularly in support of internally displaced students (war refugees).

Keywords:

educational management, Ukrainian children of war, learning environment, war trauma, school principal, internally displaced persons (war refugees)

Research methods: A survey was conducted using a questionnaire developed by the author, targeting principals from various types of schools in western Ukraine. The study also involved an analysis of contemporary literature on school management in crisis situations, especially during armed conflict. The findings were organized into tables and visualized in graphs.

Process of argumentation: Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a significant number of families with children have been displaced from the eastern and southern regions to the west. School principals faced numerous new challenges in the following areas: ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff, integrating internally displaced students into new school environments, delivering education in hybrid formats (in-person and remote), providing psychological and pedagogical support, and ensuring stress resilience in educational communities. These conditions have created a pressing need for research and pedagogical discourse on educational management in times of war.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study indicates that schools in western Ukraine have successfully adapted to working under wartime conditions. Principals implemented changes to protect students and staff and have met the integration needs of children traumatized by war.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The research shows the changes introduced in the management of Ukrainian schools to ensure educational continuity during wartime. Under crisis conditions, key recommendations include maintaining stable funding for educational institutions, ensuring clear and effective communication, and promoting innovation in online learning platforms.

Introduction

Education must remain a primary focus of public attention. This emphasis was reinforced by the United Nations, which declared September 9 as the **International Day to Protect Education from Attack** – a call to prioritize schools as safe learning environments for both students and educators. In 2015, the **Safe Schools Declaration** was opened for endorsement by the United Nations. Ukraine, by endorsing this Declaration, became the 100th country to adopt all its principles. These have proven crucial for the Ukrainian government and communities since the start of the military invasion by the Russian Federation.

Under such circumstances, educational management takes on the characteristics of crisis management, marked by ongoing monitoring, identification of emerging problems within the school environment, proactive crisis prevention, and the ability to mobilize the resources needed to ensure the stable functioning of teaching staff (Voznyuk & Dobrohorskyi, 2022, p. 51).

Amid the Russian military aggression, advancing educational policy and implementing innovations in Ukraine have become critically important tasks for educational institutions. Even during the “hot phase” of the war, children retain their right to education and continue to study in various formats. To support this, the Ukrainian education system must be adapted to current wartime realities (Panchenko et al., 2022). In this context, the school principal plays a crucial role – exercising sufficient autonomy and responding flexibly and swiftly to challenges in order to protect the health and lives of children in the educational environment (Barling & Cloutier, 2016).

Broadly speaking, the issue is not only about ensuring continuity of the educational process, but also about creating safe conditions and making strategic management decisions that support quality education. Martial law demands a specific approach to educational leadership (Thomas, 2016), and this depends on several factors, including the principal’s competence and readiness to manage complex emergencies (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). For these reasons, the study of educational management under martial law is relevant and timely.

The purpose of the article is to (1) outline the theoretical foundations for implementing educational management under martial law in the country from a pedagogical perspective; and (2) investigate specific aspects of school management practices in the western region of Ukraine aimed at sustaining the educational process during wartime and supporting temporarily displaced students from other regions (war refugees).

Theoretical background

Today, the head of an educational institution is “required to be personally, philosophically and ontologically at ease with simultaneous educational–commercial discourses”; they “have to respond not only to the needs of educational stakeholders, but also to the commercial demands” (Machin, 2014). The values and qualities of an educational manager include academic credibility, communication and negotiation skills, the ability to listen and understand others (Spendlove, 2007), proficiency in coordinating the efforts of different departments, collaboration with staff, familiarity with leadership models in education (Hoekstra & Newton, 2017), creativity in problem-solving, tolerance for ambiguity, a flexible management style, and strong communication abilities (Einsiedel, 1987). From a socio-psychological perspective, management involves the leader’s engagement with others (subordinates, supervisors, etc.), as well as fostering their coordinated and active participation in achieving shared goals (Baibakova, 2011, p. 15).

Special attention should be given to educational management, especially in the context of introducing innovations during crises. Numerous publications have addressed this issue, likely because, for the first time in human history, the educational system is continuing to function at all levels – from kindergartens and schools to higher education institutions – during an active war, as exemplified by Ukraine (Budnyk et al., 2022). Scholars define the concept of crisis management as “management of systems in a state of imbalance, which includes a set of procedures, methods, and techniques aimed at recognizing crises, preventing them, creating conditions for reducing their negative impact, and overcoming the consequences” (Epifanova & Oranska, 2016, p. 10). Accordingly, the school education manager should adopt a strategy that incorporates three main components: (1) monitoring and diagnostics using organizational indicators, (2) developing and outlining an anti-crisis strategy, and (3) implementing effective control measures.

The professional profile of a modern education manager encompasses professional, business, and personal attributes: a strong emphasis

on active communication, interaction, and dialogue (Fomin et al., 2020); a drive for leadership (Bashkir et al., 2023); determination, ambition, and a diligent work ethic; erudition, commitment to pedagogical principles, and sincerity; a readiness to take responsibility in challenging situations; self-reliance, integrity, and creativity; emotional resilience in communication (Fredrickson et al., 2002); and the ability to handle stress and adapt to new – and at times crisis-ridden – educational environments (Nikolaesku et al., 2021, pp. 80–81). The goal of educational management is to create an educational environment that functions effectively, aligns with modern standards, appeals to both current and prospective stakeholders (Baibakova, 2011, p. 15), and above all, prioritizes the safety of students' lives and learning. In Ukraine, which is currently at war due to the armed invasion by Russia, principals face extreme challenges that demand exceptional flexibility and responsibility.

Materials & Methods

Research methods

A subject-targeted method was used to analyze current scientific literature on the implementation of school management in times of crisis, particularly under martial law. Additionally, online resources were reviewed to collect up-to-date information about the challenges encountered by teachers when working with children affected by war trauma. An empirical approach, based on survey research, was adopted to assess the operational status of schools during wartime conditions. This approach focused on various aspects of school management undertaken by principals. The objective was to support temporarily displaced individuals and ensure the continuity of the educational process.

Instruments and procedures

This article presents the results of an empirical study conducted in western Ukraine, where a significant number of families with children have been displaced since the beginning of the war, having fled their

homes in the eastern and southern regions of the country. Consequently, schools have adapted to accommodate internally displaced students, which has posed school principals with new challenges in organizing the educational process under martial law. An anonymous survey was conducted among school principals, involving 50 respondents across various age groups. The questionnaire sought to assess the changes implemented in these schools since the onset of the conflict to ensure the continuity of children’s education, as well as the challenges involved in integrating students from different regions of the country who have experienced war trauma, among other related issues.

Table 1. Research sample

Variable		School principals	
		N=50	%
School location	Countryside	4	8
	Small town (up to 20,000 inhabitants)	1	2
	Medium-sized city (20,000–100,000 inhabitants)	2	4
	Large city (over 100,000 inhabitants)	43	86
Region	Ivano-Frankivsk	5	10
	Ivano-Frankivsk region	4	8
	Lviv	40	80
	Lviv region	1	2
Work experience	1-5 years	20	40
	6-10 years	2	4
	11-15 years	10	20
	Over 15 years	18	36
Gender	Woman	40	80
	Man	10	20

Source: Authors’ research

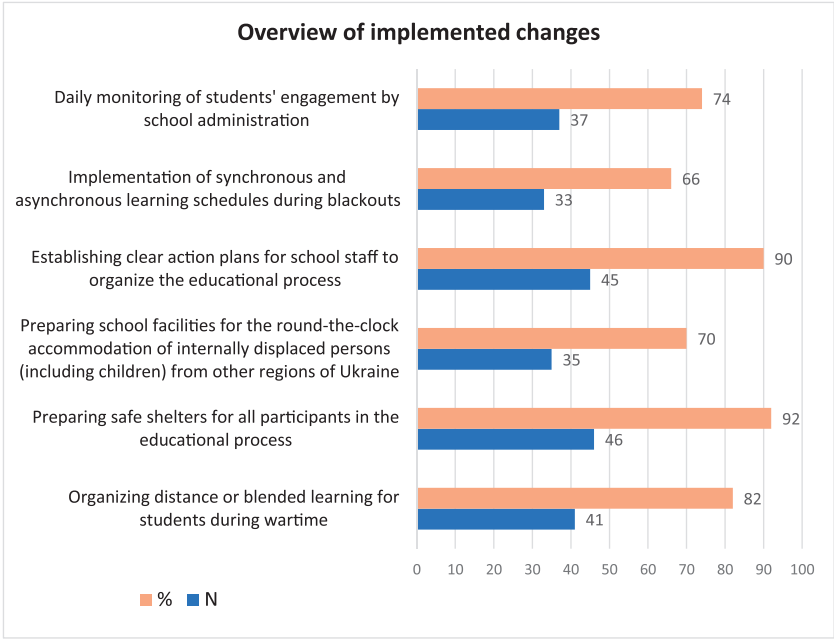
The online survey was conducted between September and December 2023, using a questionnaire developed by the author and distributed to Ukrainian school principals. The target group was deliberately selected from two western regions of Ukraine, specifically Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk, due to the significant number of displaced children attending schools in these areas. These students came from regions heavily affected by missile attacks or currently under Russian occupation. This sampling approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the indicators within a population among which the relevant phenomena and processes were most likely to be observed (Silverman, 2008).

Research results

This study sought to answer the following question: *What measures have been implemented in schools since the beginning of the Russian armed aggression in Ukraine to maintain the educational process, particularly for temporarily displaced children?*

School principals actively responded to the challenges posed by current realities in an effort to create a safe educational environment for all students and staff. A total of 92% of respondents stressed the importance of establishing secure shelters for everyone involved in the educational process. Furthermore, 90% indicated the need for developing a well-defined action plan for school staff, while 82% reported the implementation of structured wartime teaching plans. Another crucially important step noted by 74% of respondents was the daily monitoring of student participation in learning activities (see Figure 1). Therefore, even in the context of distance learning, it is necessary to track the actual number of students, ensure that they all connect on time, and follow up on any absences. This is particularly important given the direct threat to students' health – and even their lives.

Figure 1. Measures implemented by principals to continue the educational process (based on survey data)



Source: Authors' research

In promoting the well-being of refugee children, research by C. M. Somo (2024) identifies three main categories: (1) children who suffer from war-related trauma, (2) children who live in a constant state of fear and anxiety, and (3) children whose exposure to war-related violence triggers aggressive behavior. All of these student groups were present in the schools surveyed by the principals who participated in our study. Respondents unanimously agreed that primary attention should be given to mental health, specifically by “implementing trauma-informed therapy focused on reducing psychosocial reactions to war” (Somo, 2024). In this context, we advocate for incorporating considerations of ethnocultural diversity into psychological therapy and pedagogical support.

Our research also addresses another urgent concern for school administration: the need to prepare school facilities to accommodate

internally displaced individuals for overnight or extended stays. This concern was acknowledged by 70% of respondents. Given the high population density in western regions of the country and the shortage of available housing, school classrooms, kindergartens, dormitories, and other facilities were repurposed into temporary accommodations. A total of 36% of school principals reported addressing this challenge by converting school spaces, installing amenities such as shower cabins and washing machines, and establishing playrooms for schoolchildren.

In some educational institutions (56% of respondents), classrooms and sports halls were transformed into sleeping quarters for temporarily displaced individuals, including children. Moreover, schools have become hubs of volunteer activity and “resilience centers,” equipped with electric generators (to compensate for potential damage to energy infrastructure), internet access, water supplies, and more. The mobilization of volunteers and compassionate community members to set up humanitarian aid centers for internally displaced children and their families – providing them with essential items – was recognized as a key administrative achievement by 66% of respondents.

School principals (72%) (Figure 2) indicated that their top priority was creating a safe school environment. This included: (a) reviewing classroom layouts and ensuring unobstructed movement, (b) conducting daily reviews of evacuation protocols with students and holding periodic drills, despite the loss of instructional time, as such measures are necessary and extremely important in the face of real threats to the lives of students and staff, and (c) teaching children the fundamentals of mine safety, which is essential given the increasing number of reports about the use of mines in schools and other civilian infrastructure in recent months of the war in Ukraine.

Based on our research findings, school management also proposed the creation and enforcement of clearly defined protocols for responding to and operating during emergencies. This so-called “safety protocol” consists of a set of guidelines that all participants in the educational process should follow in critical situations caused by the war. In response to safety risks, schools are in the process of developing multiple protocols covering

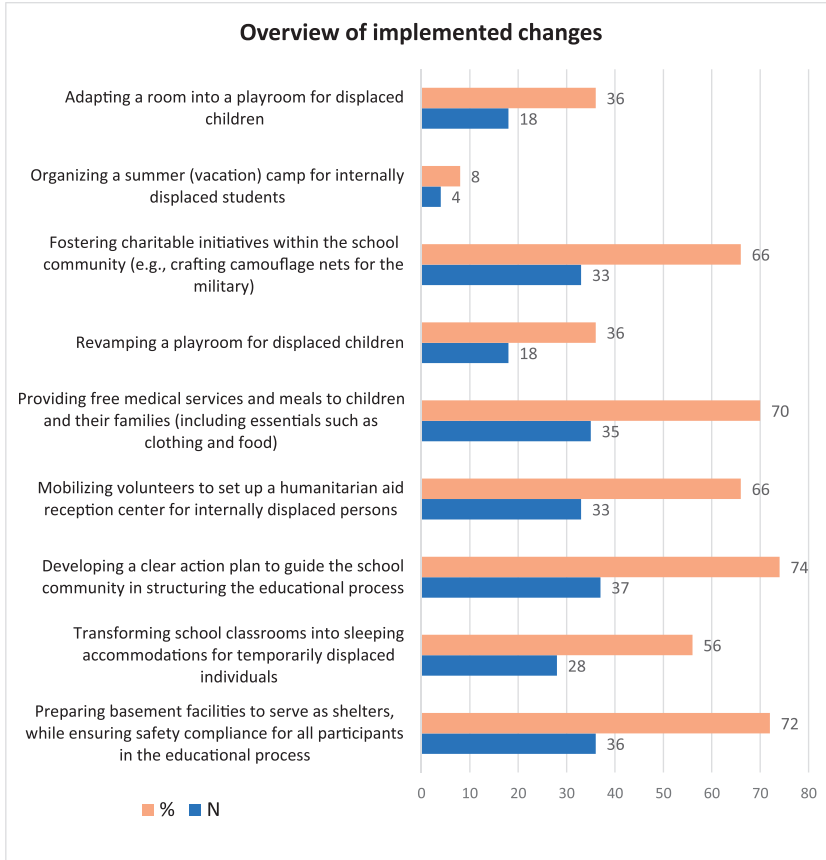
responses to air raid alerts, bomb threats, evacuation procedures, sheltering, remote instruction during classes, and more. To achieve this, the administration of each school must design its own safety strategy, taking into account factors such as the school's location, threat level, number of students, and available safety resources.

According to our study, 74% of school principals (Figure 2) emphasized the importance of developing a well-defined wartime strategy for the entire school community. In particular, it is essential to ensure that students who have relocated from areas impacted by active conflict are familiar with evacuation routes, including directions to the nearest shelter if the school does not have one. These students should also be taught the proper behavior protocols for air raids, evacuations, and sheltering.

Every educational institution has unique structural features, architectural specifics, educational resources, and financial capacity that should be optimally utilized to support children who have experienced or are currently experiencing stress due to the war. According to 70% of principals, such students receive free medical services and meals. Another important issue is ensuring that teaching staff are trained in providing first aid (Drennan et al., 2005). Among these safety measures, key emphasis is placed on providing psychological training to various categories of school employees.

Findings from the Go Global study reveal the psychological and emotional exhaustion experienced by teachers under ongoing threat during wartime. According to the study, 54% of Ukrainian teachers reported experiencing professional burnout and expressed a need for psychological support. More than 70% observed signs of burnout in their colleagues, and 80% noted an increased workload following the Russian invasion (Poya, 2023). This rise in workload is associated with the need to implement security measures, concern for the safety of students and their families, preparation of materials for online instruction, and conducting lessons in shelters during missile threats. As a result, teachers' personal resilience and their ability to support students during emergencies are critical in times of war.

**Figure 2. Initiatives implemented in schools
for temporarily displaced children from other regions**



Source: Authors' research

To strengthen resilience, safeguard psychological well-being, and protect the health of educational staff and administrators, it is necessary to implement effective psychological support strategies. Education managers should actively participate in planning and coordinating safety measures for schools located in military zones. They are also responsible for ensuring that teachers have the resources, support, and training they need. Additionally, they can help coordinate efforts with professionals from other sectors, such as healthcare, social services, and humanitarian

aid, to provide comprehensive support for the educational process during wartime.

Significant attention is paid to motivational factors in educational management, which are based on the principles of partnership among all participants in the educational process. In addition to addressing the specific challenges that school staff face in crisis conditions, an essential task of the principal is establishing favorable conditions for effective work and motivating teachers: encouraging professional development, improving the quality of education, and conserving personal resources in wartime (e.g., preventing burnout, building resilience, etc.) (Voznyuk et al., 2022, p. 52).

When working with children forced to migrate, it is important to orient the educational process toward restoring their sense of inner strength, resilience, and adaptability (Hart, 2009). To achieve this, schools – starting with the youngest students – have involved them in volunteer and charitable activities designed to inspire a sense of achievement and provide moral support to the Ukrainian military. According to school principals, this has been manifested in students' participation in writing postcards and playing games with adults (including parents), which helps set a tone for coping with life's challenges. The goal was to help these children feel safe and shielded from exposure to distressing news on television or the internet, as they already feel vulnerable and overwhelmed due to the traumatic experiences that they have endured (Budnyk et al., 2023a).

Psychologists emphasize the importance of engaging in conversations with students who have experienced war trauma, but caution that this information must be introduced in appropriate doses. Adopting an “avoidant” approach, in which educators refrain from discussing difficult or psychologically challenging topics, can hinder children's ability to understand, show empathy, and process traumatic experiences. By addressing these issues and helping students work through their emotional wounds, schools can support the healing process and enable children to begin overcoming the trauma that they have experienced (Budnyk et al., 2023b, p. 13). An empathetic approach allows children of war and their

parents to share traumatic experiences, helps educators identify early signs of behavioral or mental health issues, and facilitates the recognition and expression of feelings as part of socio-educational support in schools.

The issue of organizing volunteer activities within school communities, including students and teachers, is a high priority. These activities, such as weaving camouflage nets for the military, creating motivational postcards and drawings, and organizing charity fairs, were cited by 66% of surveyed education managers. Such initiatives help build solidarity and a shared sense of purpose through charitable efforts aimed at reinforcing collective values, such as independence, freedom, faith, culture, and national identity. Conversations with school principals revealed significant difficulties in maintaining the educational process due to periodic air raid alerts and false evacuation alarms.

During times of war, education managers face significant challenges as they must take into account several critical aspects:

1. ensuring the safety of students and staff (developing evacuation plans, establishing shelters, and training both educators and students in emergency response procedures);
2. continuing the educational process despite the military situation by implementing alternative teaching methods such as distance learning or holding classes in safe locations;
3. facilitating effective communication with the community, parents, students, and other stakeholders regarding safety protocols, changes in the academic schedule, and other important issues;
4. providing psychological support to help participants in the educational process cope with stress and emotional trauma;
5. collaborating with local authorities and military personnel to obtain timely information and develop coordinated protection strategies.

Discussion

The displacement of Ukrainian children to the western part of the country as a result of the Russian invasion, as highlighted in the survey, has created numerous challenges for school principals in the region. Among these challenges are:

1. language barriers – difficulties adapting displaced children to learning in Ukrainian-speaking schools;
2. psycho-emotional trauma – many of these children have experienced fear, witnessed suffering, lost their homes or loved ones, and require additional psychological support;
3. insufficient infrastructure – the increased number of students has overwhelmed school facilities, including classrooms, libraries, and other spaces, leading to a lack of resources for all learners;
4. financial limitations – limited funding to meet the growing needs for additional staff, psychological support, and related services;
5. social integration – internally displaced students sometimes experience a sense of alienation from local peers due to cultural, ethnic, or social differences;
6. curricular and instructional challenges – students may arrive with differing cognitive needs and levels of prior knowledge, which complicates the planning and delivery of educational programs.

In today's circumstances, educational institutions must give greater attention to the adaptation of students to the school environment, especially in schools that enroll children who are internally displaced. As Somo (2024) notes, "refugee children suffer enormous amounts of psychological trauma during war displacement and, as a result, suffer poor mental health, including psychological trauma, fear, anxiety, and aggressive behaviors."

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the number of children whose families have been forced to relocate to safer areas has increased in schools in western Ukraine, where this study was conducted. In many cases, these

children have nowhere to return to, as their homes, and sometimes entire cities, have been destroyed (e.g., Mariupol, Selydove, and Bakhmut). As a result, in addition to traditional adaptation practices, schools have worked to ensure continuity between different stages of education and have provided appropriate psychological, pedagogical, and informational support. School administrations are also developing various contingency plans so that, in the event of an emergency, the institution can quickly transition to distance or hybrid learning during or after the war.

Based on the research findings, it is worth emphasizing the necessity of studying effective mechanisms and strategies for providing psychological and pedagogical support to Ukrainian children affected by Russian aggression. To that end, school administrations are creating additional opportunities to train staff in methods and techniques for managing stress and psychological overload, as well as for providing psychological support to all participants in the educational process (Hilado et al., 2021). To support this effort, relevant informational resources for both parents and students are being developed and organized. These may include popular science articles, guides, webinars, advice columns, thematic interviews, seminars, consultations, self-help techniques, children's books about war, educational infographics, and more.

However, education managers themselves face significant stress during crises such as war. School administrators often experience strain on both their mental and physical well-being (Horwood et al., 2021), as they confront issues that they have never encountered before. These include navigating social, technological, and structural changes, managing conflict and destruction, and responding to new and unfamiliar demands – what Brimm (1983) describes as a “nonspecific response to any type of need.”

Conclusions

The implementation of educational management should be based on a thorough consideration of the needs and interests of students, teachers, administrative staff, and parents in order to achieve the shared goal

of organizing a sustainable educational process. Under crisis conditions, particularly during wartime, it is essential to maintain stable funding for educational institutions, ensure effective communication, and implement innovations in remote learning platforms and other forms of interaction.

Key challenges for pedagogical management in the context of war include:

- ensuring conditions for the delivery of quality educational services to students (a safe educational environment for in-person learning, technical support for remote learning, teacher preparedness to carry out professional duties under martial law, high-quality logistics and management processes, etc.);
- promoting the positive adaptation of internally displaced students from areas of active hostilities to new environments in educational institutions;
- creating a digital marketing system to support effective interaction between the school and all participants in the educational process, along with systematic monitoring of the school's public image, the implementation of innovations, and the development of new digital communities; this includes the use of platforms for distance or blended learning in digital spaces;
- providing psychological support to all participants in the educational process, especially children who have been most affected by the war;
- preventing professional burnout among teaching and administrative staff caused by excessive workloads and psycho-emotional stress during times of crisis;
- maintaining productive cooperation and communication with parents, students, teachers, the broader community, volunteers, local authorities, and other stakeholders.

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Teachers' and principals' experiences with assessing Ukrainian students in Polish schools

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The purpose of this article is to describe the experiences and strategies adopted by teachers and principals in response to the challenge of evaluating Ukrainian students. The research questions are as follows: What difficulties and obstacles do school teachers face in the process of assessing Ukrainian students? What strategies have teachers developed for evaluating these students?

Research methods: Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals from schools enrolling students from Ukraine. A total of 10 interviews were conducted.

Process of argumentation: The article discusses the legal aspects relevant to the research topic, dominant approaches to grading in Polish didactics (objectivist and constructivist), and a review of current research in this area. It also outlines the methodological assumptions and presents the findings according to the research questions.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The main challenges in grading Ukrainian students included a lack of systemic support, language barriers, the absence of preparatory departments, the limited effectiveness of mixed-class instruction, and the short duration of Ukrainian students' education

Keywords:

school assessment,
teachers' grading
practices,
migrant-background
students,
inclusive education

in Polish schools. Strategies adopted by teachers included modifying or adjusting grading criteria and applying a “profit or loss” calculus – choosing to promote or not promote a student – often justified as being “in the best interest of the child.”

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The strategies employed by teachers expose the inefficiency of the current grading system. The sole function of assessment has become the decision to promote students to the next grade. Ukrainian students, by virtue of their extraordinary circumstances, have in some ways contributed to exposing the overemphasis on grades in the Polish educational system. We underscore the need to move away from traditional grading toward more inclusive, student-centered approaches that take cultural context into account.

Introduction

Before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Polish schools were relatively culturally homogeneous, and teachers had little experience working with immigrant students who did not speak Polish. Schools generally lacked comprehensive tools or strategies in this area. Poland's migration policy offered no established model for integrating immigrant students in schools, particularly one involving systemic solutions that would enable long-term educational and psychological support for this group (Kamińska, 2019). This situation persisted despite the upward trend in migration and the increasing mobility that had been observed even before the war.

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainian children enrolled in Polish schools and kindergartens steadily increased, reaching 190,000 by the end of the 2022/2023 school year.¹ In a very short time, the educational community faced an urgent need for systemic solutions in the framework of migration policy, particularly in the field of education. One burning issue requiring top-down resolution was the assessment of Ukrainian students. The legal solution introduced in this regard stipulates that Ukrainian students in mainstream classes are subject to the same rules of classification, promotion, and grading as Polish students (Legal Journals 2023.900, Article 165, item 2, Education Law).

¹ Data from the Ministry of Education and Science, October 2022.

Only students placed in preparatory divisions are exempt from this evaluation system. These divisions are intended for students whose knowledge of Polish is insufficient for participation in mainstream classes. In practice, however, the vast majority of Ukrainian students – despite their limited Polish language skills – are enrolled in mainstream classes together with Polish students. Since instruction is delivered in Polish, this situation creates conditions ripe for discrimination. Amnesty International has warned that “grading male and female students who do not understand Polish well enough does not reflect their actual knowledge and is therefore unfair to them” (Amnesty International, 2023). Such practices contribute to the phenomenon of early dropout – either through premature withdrawal from formal education or through academic results that fail to reflect students’ true potential (Seynhaeve et al., 2024). Teachers and principals who work with Ukrainian students widely recognize this concern and identify assessment as the most difficult area in their work with this group (Pyżalski et al., 2022; Tędziągolska et al., 2022). The purpose of this article is to describe the experiences of teachers and principals involved in assessing Ukrainian students during the first wave of refugee arrivals, between March and June 2022.

Quantitative and qualitative nature of assessment

The discussion surrounding school evaluation – its function, form, and benchmarks – is ongoing, arouses a lot of controversy, and largely depends on the educational paradigm adopted. Instructional didactics, which stems from the objectivist paradigm, assumes that learning outcomes can be observed and measured through assessment, which reflects a student’s mastery of the material. This approach is oriented around the curriculum and strategies for the effective acquisition of knowledge. Assessment is also an important element in the behaviorist model of instrumental conditioning associated with instructional didactics, wherein positive assessments are intended to reinforce desirable behavior, while negative assessments suppress undesirable behavior (Skinner, 1958).

In contrast, the constructivist paradigm holds that knowledge is not easily measurable, and reducing assessment to the monitoring or measurement of school performance is seen as harmful. Proponents of this approach emphasize the student and the process of mental knowledge construction. Students are expected to ask questions, solve problems independently or collaboratively, and adopt an investigative and reflective mindset. Assessment in this model is individualized and qualitative. It takes the form of student self-assessment or self-evaluation (Klus-Stańska, 2018; Groenwald, 2021). Calls to include students in the evaluation process have led to movements toward the democratization of assessment (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2001, pp. 38–48). The goal is to make assessment fairer, more transparent, and more sustainable. Following this principle, teachers engage students in self- and peer-assessment, allowing them to help establish evaluation criteria. The ability to define the purpose of peer-assessment, formulate appropriate feedback, and communicate it constructively to peers – while fostering a supportive atmosphere – is crucial for developing communication skills and promoting collaborative learning. Supporting students in developing this skill enables them to provide feedback that positively impacts their learning process (Little et al., 2025, pp. 1–2).

This approach balances the relationship between the assessed and the assessor, who no longer acts as the sole authority. Through democratic assessment practices, teachers adopt individualized approaches that consider students' needs, pace, and learning styles. Students, in turn, develop democratic values and come to understand the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning (Ćwikła, 2021, p. 27). As a result, assessment becomes more responsive to the diverse needs of learners.

Contemporary research on school assessment – particularly within the “growth mindset” framework – focuses on the developmental role of assessment, its effectiveness, methodological diversity, and its impact on student motivation and educational equity (Dweck, 2006; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie, 2015; Brookhart, 2024). Assessment should function as a tool for student growth, rather than a final judgment of achievement. According to formative assessment theory, learning agency is located

with the student (Earl, 2013; Adie et al., 2018). These shifts exemplify a constructivist approach to education, which emphasizes student autonomy and self-regulation in the learning process.

This approach to assessment is grounded in socio-cultural learning theories, which explain how teachers and peers assist students in understanding their current position in the learning process and identifying where they should direct their learning next (Dann, 2014; Hattie, 2015). Learning is a contextualized process that expands the role of students as active participants in assessment (Andrade et al., 2021, p. 2).

However, both in everyday discourse among teachers and parents, as well as among educational policymakers and academics, the dominant belief is in the authoritative and reliable nature of numerical assessment – as a quantitative indicator used to represent a student and their mastery of knowledge relative to their classmates (Szyling, 2014). This approach continues to have a profound impact on assessment theory and practice, not only at the level of internal school assessment systems but also more generally – for example, in the use of educational value added as a measure of a school's teaching effectiveness (Dolata et al., 2015).

Studies of teachers' grading practices show that these are based on personal educational philosophies, a teacher's conscience, and sense of fairness, as well as existing regulations and procedures (Szyling, 2011; 2014). Teachers, when determining how to grade students, often admit to manipulating scores and criteria. In doing so, they develop personal survival strategies in response to the conflicting expectations placed on them by different stakeholders in the grading process (ibid.).

This phenomenon became particularly pronounced when teachers were required to assess Ukrainian students (Tędziągolska et al., 2022). On the one hand, they were legally obligated to apply the same rules of classification, promotion, and evaluation to Ukrainian students as to their Polish peers (Legal Journals 2023.900, Article 165, item 2, Education Law). On the other hand, most children with experiences of forced migration can be classified as students with special educational needs (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2022). This status necessitates differentiation in the educational process, including curricular content, learning requirements, and

grading systems. As Nachbauer and Kyriakides (2020, p. 6) note, “Students’ learning outcomes should depend only on their own efforts and capacity, and not on considerations over which they have no influence,” such as language of instruction or ethnic background.

Thus, teachers faced the challenge of adapting the educational process to accommodate the special educational needs of Ukrainian students, while simultaneously being required to assess them under the same conditions as their Polish peers. They often resorted to overt manipulation of scores and grading criteria, giving preferential treatment to Ukrainian students or adjusting assessment standards to match individual abilities (Tędziągolska et al., 2023). From this perspective, the experiences and strategies developed in response to the need to assess Ukrainian students are of particular research interest.

Research methodology

The research is part of a project devoted to the functioning of schools receiving students from Ukraine. The project was a grassroots initiative undertaken by the staff of the Educational Research Institute, in cooperation with researchers from other academic institutions. Its purpose was to gather knowledge about the challenges, effective solutions, and working conditions of schools operating under the extraordinary circumstances created by the war in Ukraine and the resulting arrival of refugee students.

The research is qualitative and grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The chosen method is biographical (Schütze, 2006), and the key technique employed was individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals from elementary schools that had received students from Ukraine. The research team developed a proprietary tool in the form of an interview guide, which included questions concerning the emotional experiences of both students and teachers, the didactic experiences (challenges encountered and support needed by teachers), and social experiences.

The research was carried out between June and September 2022, that is, after an incomplete semester of education for Ukrainian students in Polish schools. Public elementary schools were selected based on their high percentage of refugee students and limited prior experience working with Ukrainian learners. All participating schools were located in the Mazovia province. Due to the high workloads of these schools, establishing contact proved difficult. In the end, 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, yielding a total of about 100 pages of transcript.

The goal of the study was to describe the experiences of teachers and school principals in assessing Ukrainian students. The research focused on the experiences and strategies adopted by teachers and principals in response to the necessity of evaluating these students. The central research questions were as follows: What difficulties and obstacles do teachers encounter in the process of assessing Ukrainian students? What strategies have teachers developed for evaluating Ukrainian students

To answer these questions, all data related to school grading were extracted from the interview material and organized according to broader analytical categories. This analysis identified key barriers to the assessment of Ukrainian students, as well as the strategies adopted by teachers and principals to deal with this complex situation.

Obstacles in the evaluation process of Ukrainian students

A chief obstacle in the assessment process – and in the education of Ukrainian students – was the language barrier. Non-Polish-speaking students were granted one year of preparation for general education classes in dedicated preparatory divisions, during which they were not subject to evaluation (Journal of Laws 2022, item 795). In practice, however, many schools were unable to establish such divisions due to various limitations, including lack of space, staffing shortages, or financial constraints, despite having reported a need for them (Tędziągolska et al., 2022).

For comparison, in the 2021/2022 school year, there were fewer than 2,500 such divisions across the country, serving 38,000 children – only 27% of all refugee students. In the following school year, the number of preparatory divisions dropped by nearly two-thirds. As a result, only 15,000 Ukrainian students – about 10% of the refugee student population – were enrolled in preparatory programs (Tędziągolska et al., 2022).

Consequently, many Ukrainian students who did not speak Polish or had insufficient command of the language were placed in mainstream classes. In the end, the vast majority of Ukrainian students were assigned to mixed classrooms (Pyżalski, 2022), which meant that they were to be evaluated according to the same standards as their Polish peers.

In the interviews, both teachers and principals, when discussing the challenges that schools faced in connection with the admission of Ukrainian students, drew attention to this issue as particularly problematic. Above all, they openly criticized the legal requirement that Ukrainian students in mainstream classes be assessed according to the same rules as Polish students.

Examples of statements:

It was a regulation we never fully agreed with. (D4Wd)

*You can only excuse children from grading if they're in preparatory classes. But if the principal decided the child was fit for a regular class, that is, they were placed there and had to be graded – well, we had a bit of a **conflict**. (D6Md)*

*The grading was not very good. Because we were told to grade the children in Polish classes the same way we grade Polish children. I'm sorry to say it, but that **was not a good solution**. Those children could not be evaluated according to the same criteria as Polish children. They **did not have the same chance to learn** – some of them **were starting from scratch**. (D5Wd)*

To be honest, if I had to accept students based on their knowledge of Polish, I would have accepted two out of the hundred Ukrainian children. And to the rest, I would have had to say, "I'm really sorry, but I don't have a place for you in this school because you don't speak Polish. We only teach in Polish." (D7Md)

The fact that we admitted these children into mainstream classes – well, the situation was sort of black and white, you know? If you accepted them into Polish groups, then please treat them like Polish students. You took that risk. You didn't have to admit them, right? (D7Md)

These statements convey a clear sense of disagreement with the existing regulations. For many teachers, it was difficult – if not inconceivable – to understand how non-Polish-speaking immigrant students were expected to succeed in mixed-language classrooms, especially in the context of assessment. Teachers openly admitted that they could not assess Ukrainian students fairly or objectively – at least not according to the regulations and standardized expectations.

In this context, the grading system rooted in instructional didactics, in which teachers are expected to verify the extent to which each student has mastered the curriculum, proved essentially unworkable in real educational practice. Yet it was still imposed on teachers as a top-down requirement. Educators found themselves in a position of compliance without room for discussion or independent decision-making. Their grading decisions were dictated by subjective judgments, often built from the ground up with their own justifications. Notably, participants' statements lacked reflection on alternative grading methods, assessment strategies, or the evaluation of Ukrainian students more specifically. They also frequently mentioned a lack of institutional support, which contributed to a significant emotional burden in their work.

Examples of Statements:

There was a problem with grading. How do you evaluate them? What do you grade them on? Do you give them grades? Are they supposed to take regular tests? Or not take tests at all? Do you even grade them when they came in halfway through the second semester? (D6Md)

*It [grading] was really hard because it was – honestly – it was a huge source of **nerve-wracking stress** for the teachers, too. It was panic. It felt like **a panic attack**, and I was just as scared as they were. And at the same time, managing the situation was not easy because we really didn't know*

how to assess the skills of these children – and I don't think any school in Poland knew either because it really was, it was... it was really very hard. It completely caught us off guard. (D1Ms)

*[The teachers] were a little disgusted at first that they had to give grades at all, and they tried to find a **balance** between our kids and those kids. But overall, it was really difficult. (D5Wd)*

*Some teachers didn't know what to do... but **mostly**, it was an "**anything goes**" kind of attitude. There was **nothing structured, nothing centralized**. (D5Wd)*

*Team meetings were not easy either. One teacher says, "No, I won't let him pass." Then someone else says, "Look, but what about this? What about that?" **Decision-making was just left up to the teachers.** (D7Md)*

Teachers clearly expressed that they lacked systemic support in this area. They described the grading process for Ukrainian students as "the Wild West," a situation where anything could happen, and no clear rules applied. When assigning grades, they were left to make decisions on their own, often questioning whether what they were doing was truly in the best interest of the children. They found themselves in situations where human needs took precedence, and they had to develop their own ways of handling the evaluation of children. Their accounts show a pervasive sense of chaos, anxiety, tension, and uncertainty typical of crisis situations. What had once been a predictable and ritualized institutional practice now required active reflection and reevaluation (Giddens, 2003).

Teaching linguistically mixed classes proved to be a major challenge. In their statements, teachers noted that Ukrainian students – due to a lack of support and the language barrier – often spent time in class ineffectively. Teachers did not have adequate tools to support these children, who were in a highly stressful situation as a result of their unfamiliarity with the Polish language and educational system. This led to communication difficulties. The teachers, following their own individual approaches, dealt with a variety of school-related problems and situations involving Ukrainian children.

Teachers responded by drawing on their personal educational beliefs – what Balakhovich (2009) calls their "own points of reference," or "cognitive

attitudes. Implicit in these beliefs is a set of pedagogical values, ethical orientations, and assumptions about the student's individual and social responsibilities. As Balakhovich writes, "Teachers' beliefs are made visible in the teacher's working style, individual educational actions, interpretations of real situations, judgments, and behavioral norms" (2009).

Examples of statements:

*I really think putting those kids in regular classes was a mistake. They should've had preparatory classes and learned only Polish. **There was simply no way they could get any real support.*** (N1Wd)

*In those regular classes – you know, the mixed ones – **these poor kids just kind of sat there. They looked so lost. And sometimes, the time wasn't as productive as it should've been.*** (N1Wd)

*I got tired of the regular lessons, such as Polish language class, when I saw those Ukrainian kids just sitting there doing nothing... and I **didn't have much of an idea how to adapt the material, so to speak**, so that they could learn the same stuff as the Polish children, even though they didn't know the language. It just felt... well, it felt it wasn't right on my part. I'd leave class thinking, "No, not again... he was playing under the desk again **because I couldn't come up with anything interesting or appropriate for him.**" I just don't really know how to do it.* (N1Wd)

According to the teachers, making learning more effective was nearly impossible due to their lack of pedagogical preparation and limited knowledge of how to educate migrant students. They lacked ideas, materials, and practical tools for working with this group. As a result, they experienced feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and failure.

In expressing their opposition to evaluating Ukrainian students, teachers pointed not only to the language barrier, the lack of systemic support, and insufficient training or resources, but also to the short amount of time available to make decisions about final year evaluations. It is important to note that the study was conducted between June and September 2022, which means that Ukrainian students had been enrolled in Polish schools for only a few months.

Examples of Statements:

After all, we couldn't suddenly expect grades from these children on February 24. ... The last few weeks were really a very difficult time for us because all of a sudden, we were expected to start grading these children, just like everyone else. (D7Md)

Well, yes, but to give a meaningful, descriptive grade, you have to assess the child – you need the time and opportunity to do that. (D5Wd)

The closer we got to the end of the year, the more we wanted to be specific about the final grades because you can't just issue a certificate or a final evaluation in one day. You have to prepare for it, observe, and collect data. It's a whole process, assessing a child – and we were waiting the whole time for some clear guidance: how to assess? What to base it on? What should the final evaluation look like? (D6Wd).

According to the teachers, assigning grades is a process that requires long-term observation and data collection, which they had no opportunity to do under these circumstances. In the constructivist model, the teacher steps away from the role of evaluator and instead focuses on supporting the student, following their progress, and motivating them to continue learning. Although this may seem achievable in theory, teachers explained that they lacked the tools to fulfill this role, citing numerous obstacles that stood in their way.

Table 1 Obstacle to assessing Ukrainian students

Obstacles to assessing Ukrainian students
Lack of systemic support
Language barriers
Absence of preparatory divisions
Ineffective learning in mixed classrooms
Short duration of Ukrainian students' stay in Polish school

Source: Author's own study

Teachers' assessment strategies

In our discussion, we emphasize the significant role of teachers in devising the strategies used to assess the school performance of Ukrainian students. In educational practice, it is up to the teacher to decide how to assess, what will be evaluated, and which criteria matter most (Szyling, 2011, p. 85). **“Those who had heart were guided by their heart; those who had more reason were guided by their reason.” (D5Wd)**

Teachers and principals, placed in a situation where they were required to evaluate, described the strategies that they adopted to handle this challenge. Many spoke of relying on their conscience or intuition. One strategy that emerged from the interviews **was the modification – or even manipulation – of grading criteria.**

Examples of statements:

At our school, we graded these children very generously. When it came to Polish classes, I didn't grade the kids based on the core curriculum because obviously that doesn't make any sense. They don't know how to do it. I mostly evaluated their engagement in class, and most of the teachers did the same: they checked if the kids were engaged and interested. It was really hard, really incredibly hard. One of the hardest things I've had to do. (N1Wd)

We translated tests, pulled grades from Ukraine, and tried to find subjects that matched what our teachers taught. ... Just based it on basic classwork. We told them, “Let them do anything. It doesn't have to be grade 8 content, even if they're in grade 8.” (D6Md)

Obviously, I can't expect them to... (D6Md) I mean, yes, they wrote a classification exam at the end, in June. But if I saw that the student was engaged – especially if they were really trying to learn Polish – then I felt like it was worth it. (D7Md)

Teachers' methods of grading Ukrainian students stemmed from an effort to strike a balance between official regulations and their own professional values, between near-term compliance and longer-term ethical

responsibility (Groenwald, 2014). They described grading as an undefined, open-ended task, one they carried out according to personal beliefs, conscience, or intuition. Altering grading criteria often meant lowering academic demands, paying more attention to effort and engagement, or incorporating students' previous academic achievements from their home schools. One strategy that ultimately proved unsuccessful was verifying the students' prior performance through records from their schools in Ukraine.

Example of statement:

*There was this idea: okay, well then **let them provide us with some documents from Ukraine, show us what grades they had there.** But it turned out they had completely different subjects, a completely different grading scale – I think it's from 1 to 10 – and everything was at completely different levels. (D6Md)*

The educational systems in Poland and Ukraine turned out to be radically different. These attempts by the school community to find solutions independently constitute additional evidence of the lack of top-down government support, such as the absence of a synthesized guide to the Ukrainian curriculum (including stages of education, age of school entry, grading scales, required subjects, etc.).

Another strategy that emerged could be described as a “**profit and loss**” calculus, underpinned by the principle of acting “**in the best interest of the child.**” Teachers were often focused on ensuring that students were promoted to the next grade level in order to avoid disrupting the classroom peer group. “For children, **being anchored in the class unit was really important for their sense of security.**” (D7Md). In some cases, children were intentionally held back a grade to give them more time to acquire the language: “In early childhood education, we have four Ukrainian children who – if everything goes according to our agreements – will repeat the first grade. **This was based on an agreement and the parents' consent.**” (D7Md)

These statements show that teachers were concerned with the safety, emotional well-being, and developmental needs of Ukrainian students.

Their decisions exemplify their professional judgment and commitment to doing what they believed was best for each child. It is worth noting that the area of decision-making is tied to teachers' individual theories, which, as Polak notes, "constitute an instrument for adapting to the conditions in which [the teacher] works and, at the same time, a factor that allows them to transform the external network of teaching and educational situations into a framework that is understandable to them." (2000, p. 163). The pedagogical worldview embedded in these complex individual theories – particularly regarding assessment strategies – is expressed in practical action. This helps explain not only the phenomenon of "variability of assessments" (Szyling, 2011, p. 85), but also the discretionary nature of grading criteria and the absence of a clear, unified assessment strategy.

Szyling refers to this phenomenon – of adapting assessment methods to classroom realities – as *classometry*. Its goal is to reduce the tension between formal measurement practices and the practicalities of grading by teachers, which creates a "terrain of compromises," often involving the occasional lowering of academic demands (Szyling, 2011). One of the principals interviewed also described the strategies employed by Ukrainian parents in response to the possibility of their child not being promoted:

*It was basically a kind of **reassurance from the parents**. They wanted to be sure that even if we recommended holding the child back, they'd just come back in August with a certificate from a Ukrainian school saying that the child had completed that level – and we'd have to enroll them in the next grade. (D7Md)*

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of Ukrainian students who participate in remote education through the Ukrainian school system, it is worth noting that many students pursue education in both systems simultaneously. These students, even if not promoted in the Polish school system, may still present a certificate confirming completion of a given grade from their Ukrainian school. This is a kind of legal workaround that can be applied in practice.

The standardized grading system proved useful in the context of “Polish as a foreign language,” even though teachers of this subject were not formally required to assign grades. One teacher pointed out the need to assess Ukrainian students in these classes:

*As for Polish as a foreign language, which I taught, **there didn't even have to be a grade. But I still gave one.** It was much easier for me because I had structured topics, I got feedback from the children, they did exercises, I could hear how they spoke and see the progress they were making. So it was easier to grade them and give them feedback on what they didn't know, what they needed to work on. Well, a grade is such feedback. (N1Wd).*

In preparatory departments, where Ukrainian students were enrolled, the practice of assessment regained its traditional function and was successfully used. In this context, grading once again functioned as a standardized tool. Although students were only expected to receive a certificate of participation in these classes, the teacher found it difficult to forgo summative assessment, even though it could have been easily replaced with descriptive assessment, which is inseparable from formative assessment. More specifically, formative assessment relies on feedback intended to support the student's learning process. The purpose of formative assessment is to foster students' sense of agency and support the development of self-esteem and autonomy. It is a future-oriented process – a dialogue between teacher and student, and also among students themselves (Ćwikła, 2021, p. 31). Such feedback could be translated into Ukrainian using Google Translate, the simplest free tool available to anyone, which makes communication more accessible for students.

Table 2. Teacher assessment strategies

Teachers' assessment strategies
Changing or manipulating grading criteria based on the teacher's intuition
Taking into account students' previous grades
"Profit and loss" calculus: actions taken "in the best interest of the child" (both promotion and non-promotion to the next grade)
Use of traditional and standardized assessments during Polish language classes for foreigners, though not mandatory).

Source: Author's own study

Study Limitation

This research project has certain limitations that should be taken into account when generalizing its findings. First, the number of participants was limited. Second, the study was conducted during the first wave of war refugees and focused on teachers' initial experiences as they developed their own strategies for the educational process. Now, after three years of war and a continued increase in migration to Poland, the presence of Ukrainian students has become a routine part of school life, which is why it would be worthwhile to repeat this study. Additionally, the research covered exclusively primary schools. Future studies should expand to include high school teaching staff as well.

Conclusion

Teachers' grading practices take on many forms – from resistance and disagreement with the idea of grading newly arrived students to ethical considerations surrounding the act of assessment. The obstacles to grading Ukrainian students identified by teachers and principals include a lack of systemic support, language barriers, the absence of preparatory divisions, ineffective learning in mixed classrooms, and the short duration of students' educational experience in Polish schools. To cope with

the obligation to assign grades, teachers and principals reported strategies such as altering grading criteria, adjusting or inflating scores, or recognizing previous grades from students' schools of origin. These approaches are rooted in individual pedagogical theories.

The legitimacy of grading itself is not questioned. However, teachers appear not to engage in deeper reflection on the function of grading – as a potential tool for learning design and for identifying alternative paths to support students in overcoming individual learning difficulties (Faber & Billmann-Mahecha, 2010, p. 30). In the accounts provided by educators and principals, there is a notable absence of references to descriptive or formative assessment, differentiated approaches, multiple forms of feedback, or the influence of cultural context on assessment practices. The educational potential of assessment is, in this context, largely overlooked. As a result, the support system for students is situated outside the grading framework.

The current migration crisis calls into question the continued validity of existing assessment systems. Longstanding norms and rules may, under new circumstances, prove ineffective, outdated, or even counterproductive. Teachers indicate that the traditional school grading system does not function effectively in these new circumstances. Their strategies expose the inefficiencies of the system. Ukrainian students, due to the exceptional nature of their situation, have inadvertently exposed the overreliance on grades in the Polish education system, in which grades, despite often being inadequate or even absurd, remain the default requirement.

Given forecasts that a significant number of refugee students will stay in Poland after the war (Herbst & Sitek, 2023), systemic support for teachers and students in the education of Ukrainian students is especially important. Although some reports and recommendations in this area are beginning to emerge (Tędziągolska et al., 2023; Tomasik, 2024), there is still insufficient attention given to a relatively unrecognized concept in Poland: *culturally responsive assessment* (Gay, 2010; Nayır et al., 2019; Nortvedt et al., 2020). This student-centered approach to assessment emphasizes differentiation and respects students' cultural ways of knowing and participating. Incorporating students' cultural contexts can help

create a more inclusive, relevant, and engaging learning environment (Neugebauer et al., 2022). Assessment of Ukrainian students' academic performance should be a fair and flexible process – one that takes into account their unique circumstances, including cultural background, language proficiency, emotional well-being, and the challenges of adapting to a new environment.

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Educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The aim of this research was to identify the educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine. The research problem was formulated as follows: What are the educational and career aspirations of the Polish and Ukrainian students participating in the study, and are there any differences between the two groups in this regard?

Research methods: A quantitative research approach was applied, using the diagnostic survey method with a questionnaire technique. The participants were selected using a snowball sampling method, also known as chain sampling.

Process of argumentation: The paper begins with an introduction discussing the significance of educational and career aspirations in the lives of young people. The theoretical section defines the concept of aspirations and outlines the factors that influence their development. This is followed by a description of the methodology used in the author's study, including a profile of the research sample. The empirical section presents the study's findings, and the paper concludes with a summary of conclusions and recommendations.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The research was carried out between January 2022 and May 2023 in Poland (in the Wielkopolskie, Mazowieckie, and

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Lubelskie provinces) and Ukraine (in the Ternopil and Lviv provinces). The study sample included three groups of students (948 individuals): one group of secondary school students from Poland and two groups from Ukraine (equivalent to secondary education), surveyed both before and during the war. The findings revealed both similarities and differences in the educational aspirations of the participating adolescents. These results may serve as an inspiration for further research into the career trajectories of future generations and as the foundation for designing educational programs intended to support the development of young people's aspirations.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Assisting adolescents in identifying and developing their educational and career aspirations has been one of the key challenges of secondary education. Teachers' professional efforts in this respect should aim at expanding young people's horizons and equipping them with key knowledge and skills needed to plan their future careers and adapt to a rapidly changing labor market. Educational activities should therefore be designed to help students recognize their individual aptitudes, understand the specifics of various professions, and become aware of labor market demands.

Introduction

Choosing an educational pathway and career is one of the key decisions that every young person must make. For many adolescents, it is a difficult and stressful process. It often involves anxiety and a sense of uncertainty related to new educational prospects and, in many cases, a lack of knowledge about the current labour market, in-demand professions, or the availability of schools offering training in specific fields (Wosik-Kawala & Sarzyńska-Mazurek, 2017). One of the earliest education-related decisions takes place during the so-called "adolescent crisis" – a period when young people are seeking meaning and purpose in life. This makes it a breakthrough moment in designing their future (Gorard et al., 2012; Zawada, 2013). Defining one's educational and career aspirations in times of rapid political, economic, social and cultural change is particularly difficult, especially in the wake of the recent pandemic and the intensification of armed conflict in Ukraine.

The escalation of the war in Ukraine has led to the migration of Ukrainian citizens, primarily to EU countries, but also to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Poland, as a country neighboring

the war zone, has played a particularly important role – especially given its long-standing status as both a workplace and residence for many Ukrainians. Among the migrants are families with school-aged children who have continued their education in Polish schools. In the 2021/2022 school year, there were approximately 350,000 refugee children of school age in Poland, of whom around 39% – that is, over 139,000 – attended Polish schools (Chrostowska, 2022). A significant proportion of these children are likely to continue their education in Polish secondary schools and have begun planning their future education and career in Poland.

The need to choose one's educational path – and consequently, a professional career – while lacking a full understanding of the social and political structure, as well as the economic, educational, and cultural realities of a foreign country is a particularly difficult task for Ukrainian adolescents. Life plans must take into account not only individual preferences, but also the expectations of the community in which the person will study and possibly work. This understanding may provide grounds for the educational role of schools in supporting students as they make informed decisions about their future educational and career paths.

Theoretical framework of the study

Aspirations are among the major drivers of human action – they guide the learning process and an individual's creative pursuits, and they exert a considerable impact on innovative efforts aimed at self-improvement and shaping one's environment. Aspiration has been conceptualized as the drive to achieve set goals and realize life ideals, which in turn influence a person's life choices (Okoń, 2007; Jakimiuk, 2012). Aspirations related to the level and type of education a person wishes or intends to complete in the future are referred to as *educational aspirations* (Skorny, 1980; Bartczak, 2019). These are closely linked to *career aspirations*, which concern the future profession, working conditions, and desired job position. In view of the close relationship between educational and career aspirations, the combined term *educational and career aspirations* is also used (Sack & Szczerban, 2002).

Aspirations are dynamic and subject to change. They are determined by both personality traits and environmental influences (Bartczak, 2019). Personality-related factors include temperament, abilities, needs, and motivation. Temperament affects a person's behavior and their need for stimulation, while abilities are particularly important in determining the level of career aspirations. Motivation and aspirations are closely intertwined. Educational and career aspirations often stem from the need for self-realization – that is, the desire for personal development, success, and professional advancement – as well as the need for achievement, which encompasses both success and failure. Achievements in various tasks tend to boost aspiration levels, while repeated failures may cause them to decline (Bednarczyk-Jama, 2006).

The family environment has a significant impact on a child's level of aspirations. Significant factors include parents' educational background, economic status, lifestyle, and – crucially – their advice and personal example. Through their behaviour and values, family and child's immediate environment demonstrate to the young generation who it is worth becoming and what is worth striving for (Zaleski, 1994). A young person's aspirations are also shaped by the type, level, structure, and culture of the environments in which they live (Slany et al., 2023). The socio-economic context impacts their everyday experiences, as do observations of others and media messages, which communicate what is desirable or worth aspiring to. These cultural signals convey specific ideas and values that contribute to the formation of particular aspirations (Bednarczyk-Jama, 2006).

An important role in shaping the educational and career aspirations of children and adolescents is also played by the school environment, including the school climate, as well as student-teacher and peer relationships. Developing students' aspirations is among the educational objectives of the school, whereas responsibility for its implementation lies with teachers. In addition, peer groups have a significant influence on the aspirations of children and adolescents. They may offer support when an individual's aspirations are accepted by the group or have a negative impact when those aspirations are not approved. As a result, students are often required to modify their aspirations and make choices among

different standards and values, which frequently entails facing conflicts between their personal goals and the aspirations conveyed by their peers or teachers (Bednarczyk–Jama, 2006).

Procedure

The aim of this study was to identify the educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine. The main research problem was formulated as the following question: What are the educational and career aspirations of Polish and Ukrainian students participating in the study, and are there any differences between the two groups in this regard? The sample consisted of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents. It is important to note that the Ukrainian participants were surveyed while still residing in Ukraine. Since war trauma can influence one's life plans, the study was conducted in two separate groups of Ukrainian students: the first group included adolescents who participated in the study before the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022; the second group consisted of adolescents surveyed during the ongoing war.

A random purposive sampling technique was used in the study. The sampling was purposive due to the criteria of age (secondary school students) and logistics (obtaining consent from school principals in both Poland and Ukraine). It was random in the sense that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study was carried out from 31 January to 11 April 2022 in Poland and from 15 February 2022 in Ukraine for the pre-war group. The second group of Ukrainian students was surveyed from 22 April 2023 to 25 May 2023, that is, during the war.

The research was conducted using a diagnostic survey developed by the authors. The survey was administered in both Polish and Ukrainian. The total sample included 948 students: 366 from Poland (38.61%), 453 from Ukraine before the war (47.78%), and 129 Ukrainian students surveyed during the war (13.61%). Among the respondents were 616 girls (64.98%) and 332 boys (35.03%). In the Polish group, 275 girls (75.16%)

and 91 boys (24.86%) participated. In Ukraine, the pre-war group included 279 girls (61.59%) and 174 boys (38.41%), whereas the wartime group comprised 62 girls (48.06%) and 67 boys (51.94%). Participants ranged in age from 14 to 20 years. Polish respondents were secondary school students, while Ukrainian participants were enrolled in the third level of education, which results in the acquisition of secondary education. This is a pilot, exploratory study intended as a starting point for further, more extensive research that will incorporate a representative sample.

Study findings

Adolescents’ educational aspirations, as well as their anticipated professional careers, are strongly influenced by their upbringing, which is largely guided by their personal system of values. In order to identify the hierarchy of values among the study participants, they were presented with 12 groups of values. Each respondent was asked to rank these value groups from most to least important. The most important value was assigned a score of 1, and the least important a score of 12. As a result, the lower the average score, the more highly a particular value was regarded by the respondents. The results obtained using this method made it possible to assign ranks to each group of values in the different study groups.

Table 1. Hierarchy of values among Polish and Ukrainian adolescents participating in the study

Values	Rank PL	Rank UK1	Rank UK 2	PL \bar{x}	PL SD	UK1 \bar{x}	UK1 SD	UK2 \bar{x}	UK2 SD
Allocentric	2	5	2	5.23	3.45	5.56	3.92	4.35	3.71
Educational	3	2	6	5.51	3.18	5.41	3.76	4.88	3.67
Cultural	10	8	11	7.36	3.01	6.24	3.52	5.91	3.60
Materialistic	6	4	3	6.42	3.21	5.51	4.10	4.59	3.79
Patriotism/Civic responsibility	11	11	8	7.93	3.20	6.46	3.79	5.50	3.95

Values	Rank PL	Rank UK1	Rank UK 2	PL \bar{x}	PL SD	UK1 \bar{x}	UK1 SD	UK2 \bar{x}	UK2 SD
Prosocial/altruistic	5	7	10	6.39	2.97	5.96	3.48	5.89	3.36
Pleasure	7	9	7	6.68	3.01	6.27	3.73	5.23	3.83
Family	1	1	1	4.96	3.97	5.25	4.29	4.18	3.98
Spiritual/religious	9	10	9	7.19	4.25	6.38	4.29	5.65	4.28
Health	4	3	5	5.78	3.41	5.48	4.15	4.66	3.94
Work-related	8	6	4	6.80	3.08	5.71	4.02	4.60	3.74
Authority-related	12	12	12	8.28	3.30	6.60	3.95	6.01	4.06

PL – Polish adolescents; UK1 – Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the war; UK2 – Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war;
 \bar{x} – mean; SD – standard deviation

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that both Polish and Ukrainian adolescents (from both Ukrainian groups) participating in the study attributed the highest value to the family, along with the support and sense of community it provides. The second-highest ranked value for Polish adolescents and for Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war was allocentric values – such as peer relationships, friendship, and sociability. Interestingly, Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the invasion ranked these allocentric values only in fifth place, after family, education, health, and materialistic values.

Educational values, which ranked second among the pre-war Ukrainian group, held a similar position among Polish students (3rd), but dropped to sixth place among Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war. These findings are consistent with results reported by Mamontova et al. (2023), which show that fear and anxiety resulting from ongoing armed conflict can diminish students' motivation to learn. For adolescents affected by the war, education appeared to be less of a priority than materialistic values – conceptualized as a financially secure life – which took third place in their value hierarchy. Materialistic values were also rated relatively highly by the pre-war Ukrainian group (ranked 4th). Polish students,

by contrast, placed greater importance on health (ranked 4th) and caring for others (ranked 5th) than on material security (ranked 6th).

Altruism was rated particularly low (ranked 10th) by Ukrainian students surveyed during the war. However, this same group gave considerably higher importance to patriotism – defined as love for one’s homeland and concern for national interests – ranking it 8th, noticeably higher than in the other two groups. The significant differences in value systems observed between the study groups most likely reflect their differing social determinants (Bartczak, 2019), including cultural and economic distinctions between the two countries and Ukraine’s current political situation. Similarities across the groups emerged in the generally lower ranking of religious, cultural, and authority-related values. To identify the differences between the compared student groups, a chi-square test of independence was used in subsequent analyses.

Table 2. Life goals and pursuits of adolescents participating in the study

Life goals and pursuits	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I pursue many important goals in my life that I have set for myself	221	60.38	227	61.15	92	71.32
Life sets for me goals and tasks I must fulfil	86	23.50	117	25.83	26	20.15
I haven’t thought about it	42	11.48	42	9.27	10	7.75
I have no goals in life and I do not pursue anything	17	4.64	17	3.75	1	0.78
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$x^2 = 9.016; df = 6; p = 0.172$

The vast majority of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents participating in the study declared that they had many important goals in life they had set for themselves. This response was given by 60.38% of respondents from Poland, 61.15% of Ukrainian respondents, and as many as 71.32% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war. Nearly one in four

respondents from the Polish and pre-war Ukrainian groups – and one in five respondents surveyed during the war – believed that they had no influence over their life goals and pursuits, as many of their choices were determined by events beyond their control, which prevent them from fulfilling their life plans.

It is of considerable concern that some respondents stated they had no life goals or aspirations. This response was given by 4.64% of Polish respondents, 3.75% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed before the war, and 0.78% of those surveyed during the war. However, the analyses conducted indicate that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of life goals and pursuits. The next step in the research was to determine whether the adolescents participating in the study had clearly defined goals related to their future education.

**Table 3. Clearly defined goals of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents
related to future education**

Educational goals of study participants	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
YES	110	30.05	187	41.28	48	37.21
To some extent	182	49.73	217	47.90	73	56.59
NO	74	20.22	49	10.82	8	6.20
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 27.778; df = 4; p = 0.00001$$

In every group of adolescents participating in the study, the majority were individuals with no clearly defined educational plans (49.73% of Polish respondents, 47.90% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed before the war, and 56.59% of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war). The sample also included individuals who had no vision of their own educational path and were unable to specify any goals in this respect. Notably, the proportion of such individuals was twice as high among Polish

respondents (20.22%) compared to the two Ukrainian groups (10.82% and 6.20%, respectively). The differences between the study groups were found to be statistically significant.

The finding that 70% of Polish adolescents lack clearly defined educational plans is consistent with earlier research by Fatyga (2005), who over a decade ago observed a tendency among young people to perceive their life goals in short-term categories. This trend has been linked to the rapidly changing labour market in Poland and to the uncertainty among parents, who no longer act as clear role models in this respect. The ability to pursue one’s educational goals depends on a number of factors that enable individuals to meet the expectations they set for themselves.

Table 4. Factors influencing the attainment of educational objectives according to adolescents participating in the study

Factors influencing the attainment of educational objectives	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Perseverance in attaining goals, diligence	79	21.59	170	37.53	44	34.11
Self-confidence	73	19.95	67	14.79	17	13.18
Family support	63	17.22	66	14.57	34	26.36
Innate predispositions or capabilities	45	12.30	39	8.60	10	7.75
Friends’ support	41	11.20	8	1.77	5	3.88
Finances	35	9.57	51	11.26	16	12.40
Environmental pressure	13	3.56	8	1.77	0	0
Proximity from home to educational institutions	10	2.74	4	0.88	2	1.55
Low academic demands	5	1.37	8	1.77	1	0.78
Other (e.g., time, ambitions, motivation, teacher support, etc.)	2	0.55	32	7.06	0	0
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$\chi^2 = 111.905; df = 18; p = 0.000$

According to the largest number of Ukrainian respondents from both groups (37.53% and 34.11%, respectively), the key factor determining the attainment of educational goals is perseverance and diligence in pursuing the set objective. This view is shared by 21.59% of Polish students. Almost one in five Polish participants indicated that self-confidence (19.95%) and family support (17.22%) are important in helping to achieve educational plans. The belief that self-confidence is a decisive factor in reaching educational objectives was reported by considerably fewer Ukrainian students – 14.79% of those surveyed before the war and 13.18% during the war.

The importance of family support in achieving educational goals was most often reported by the group of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war (26.36%). A notable difference between the three study groups was found in relation to reliance on friends. Among Polish respondents, (11.20%) believed that friends may facilitate the attainment of educational objectives. This opinion was expressed by far fewer Ukrainian students from both groups (1.77% and 3.88%, respectively). The differences between the study groups were found to be statistically significant. A similar proportion of students from each group (around 10%) believed that the implementation of educational plans depends on financial resources. In view of these findings, it is of interest to examine the plans of the adolescents participating in the study after completing their current level of schooling.

Table 5. Plans of adolescents participating in the study after graduating from their current school

Plans of adolescents after completing secondary school	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pursuing higher education	149	40.71	239	52.76	61	47.29
Starting a job in their home country	25	6.83	11	2.43	3	2.33
Starting a job abroad	23	6.28	12	2.65	4	3.10

Plans of adolescents after completing secondary school	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Starting a job and continuing education	73	19.95	97	21.41	36	27.91
Starting a family	23	6.28	0	0	1	0.78
Acquiring professional skills as quickly as possible (courses, training programs, post-secondary schools)	19	5.19	22	4.86	6	4.65
Don't know yet	32	8.74	46	10.16	14	10.86
Taking at least one year off	13	3.55	6	1.32	4	3.10
Other	9	2.46	20	4.41	0	0
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$x^2 = 72.11; df = 16; p = 0.000$

The largest group of Polish (40.71%) and Ukrainian adolescents (52.76% of those surveyed before the war and 47.29% during the war) plan to pursue higher education after graduating from secondary school. A relatively large proportion of respondents indicated that they intend to begin working while continuing their education. This vision of the future was reported by 19.95% of Polish adolescents, 21.41% of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the war, and 27.91% of those surveyed during the war. The study also included respondents who were unsure about their future plans: 8.74% of Polish students, 10.16% of Ukrainian students surveyed before the war, and 10.86% of those surveyed during the war stated that they did not yet know what decisions they would make concerning their future. As part of the study, the authors also examined the motivations that drive young people in making decisions about continuing their education.

Table 6. Motivations for continuing education among respondents

Reasons for continuing education	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mastering in-demand professional skills	112	30.60	103	22.74	36	27.91
Becoming independent	103	28.14	166	36.65	47	36.43
Broadening knowledge, interests and skills	95	25.96	115	25.39	24	18.60
Meeting parents' expectations	23	6.29	35	7.73	14	10.85
Socializing with	20	5.46	2	0.44	1	0.78
Not planning to continue education	7	1.91	6	1.33	3	2.33
Other	6	1.64	26	5.74	4	3.10

$$\chi^2 = 47.225; df = 12; p = 0.000$$

The respondent groups also differ in terms of their motivations for continuing education. For the largest group of Polish respondents (30%), the most important reason to continue education is the desire to acquire attractive professional skills. In contrast, for Ukrainian students, the main motivation is the desire to become independent (36% in both Ukrainian groups). Becoming independent also motivates 28.14% of Polish respondents to continue their education, whereas nearly one-fourth of Ukrainian students are driven by the goal of gaining professional skills in order to secure good employment.

Slightly more than 25% of Polish and Ukrainian respondents (surveyed before the war) reported that an important motivation for continuing their education is the opportunity to expand their knowledge and develop their interests and skills. This reason was indicated by a smaller proportion of Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war (18.60%). A similar number of respondents from all study groups reported that they are motivated to continue their education to meet their parents' expectations. Choosing a career path is one of the hardest life decisions and may be facilitated by consulting with various stakeholders.

**Table 7. Stakeholders consulted by adolescents
when planning their education**

Stakeholders consulted by adolescents when planning their education	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Parents	113	30.88	248	54.75	89	69.00
I make decisions on my own	81	22.13	135	29.80	23	17.83
Peers	88	24.04	13	2.87	4	3.10
Siblings	37	10.11	11	2.43	3	2.33
Grandparents	23	6.29	2	0.44	1	0.78
Romantic partner (boyfriend/girlfriend) or acquaintances	3	0.82	30	6.62	4	3.10
Psychologist	13	3.55	7	1.54	0	0
Career counsellor	6	1.64	7	1.54	3	2.33
School counsellor	2	0.55	0	0	2	1.56
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$\chi^2 = 220.476; df = 16; p = 0.000$

The groups of students compared in the study differ significantly in terms of seeking support when choosing their further education. More than half of Ukrainian students (54.74% of those surveyed before the war and 69% during the war) reported consulting their educational plans with their parents, whereas only 30.88% of Polish respondents considered their parents’ opinions in this regard. Similar findings were reported by Chepil and Sarzyńska-Mazurek (2023) in their study involving Ukrainian university students. Nearly one-fourth of Polish respondents seek advice about educational opportunities from their peers, whereas among Ukrainian students, this was reported by only around 3%.

A relatively large proportion of students from each group (22.13% of Polish respondents, 29.80% of Ukrainians surveyed before the war, and 17.83% during the war) do not consult their decisions with anyone and make choices about their educational future independently. Similar

results were obtained in all study groups concerning consultation with professionals responsible for educational guidance. It was found that such stakeholders do not enjoy the trust of the respondents in matters for which they are formally appointed.

**Table 8. School initiatives to support students
in planning further education**

Modes of assistance	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Schools offer no assistance with further education choices	246	67.22	286	63.13	55	42.64
Consultations with class tutor	52	14.21	52	11.48	15	11.63
Meetings with career counsellor	26	7.11	19	4.19	29	22.48
Meetings with representatives of different professions	24	6.56	61	13.47	27	20.93
Meetings with school counsellor	9	2.46	18	3.97	0	0
Meetings with psychologist	9	2.46	17	3.75	3	2.33
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 80.137; df = 10; p = 0.000$$

The largest group of Polish students (67.22%) and Ukrainian students surveyed before the war (63.13%) declared that their school does not offer any support or assistance in choosing further education. This view was also expressed by 42.64% of Ukrainian students surveyed during the war. Only a small number of Polish respondents reported that their schools provided support through chats with class tutors (14.21%), meetings with career counsellors (7.11%), or encounters with representatives of various professions (6.56%). A slightly more favorable situation was observed among Ukrainian students. Those surveyed before the war declared participating in meetings with professionals (13.47%) and having discussions with their class tutor on this topic (11.48%).

Interestingly, Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war rated their schools more positively in terms of fulfilling the task of supporting students in their educational planning. Many of them confirmed that their schools had organized meetings with career counsellors (22.48%) and with representatives of different professions (20.93%). The differences observed between the groups were statistically significant.

Table 9. Frequency of reflecting upon one’s future career

How often do you think about your future career	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very often (1)	99	27.05	128	28.26	37	28.68
Fairly often (2)	101	27.60	133	29.36	42	32.56
Difficult to say (3)	109	29.78	129	28.48	36	27.91
Hardly ever (4)	49	13.39	47	10.38	10	7.75
Never (5)	8	2.19	16	3.53	4	3.10
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$\chi^2 = 3.265004; df = 4; p = 0.51450$

The analyses show that the vast majority of respondents reflect on their future careers. Only a few reported not planning their careers at all or doing so only rarely. No statistically significant differences were found between the student groups participating in the study.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study revealed that, although some differences exist between the groups in relation to their educational pathways and career plans, Polish and Ukrainian adolescents place a high value on education and show similar patterns in terms of educational aspirations. The majority of respondents expressed a desire to pursue higher education, which they associate

with the opportunity to secure their dream job and gain independence. These results correspond to findings by Roguska and Antas-Jaszczuk (2017), which indicate that young people from Poland, Latvia, and Belarus feel the need to plan for their future. The present findings also correspond to those of Długosz (2017), who showed that Polish and Ukrainian students have very similar career plans and generally intend to continue their education beyond secondary school. Furthermore, the finding that students consider their future education and careers to be dependent mainly on their own efforts and diligence in acquiring knowledge and skills supports the conclusions of Antas-Jaszczuk, Roguska, Loboda, and Davidova (2024).

However, it should be noted that a majority of respondents from both countries lack clearly defined educational and career plans. This result mirrors findings by Łuczak (2022), who found that nearly half of the 1,337 students in her study did not attach importance to their educational and career goals and were willing to revise or abandon them if they proved unattainable. Undoubtedly, being aware of one's educational goals, having the ability to define them, and working to achieve them influences an individual's sense of purpose, self-realization, and vision for the future. At the same time, the ability to adapt and modify one's goals may become a valuable skill in the modern labour market.

Ukrainian students participating in the study consult their educational choices primarily with their parents, whereas the Polish respondents, in addition to their parents' opinions, place high value on the views of their peers. A considerable number of respondents reported making decisions about their further education independently. However, young people often need guidance – particularly given the complexities of the modern labour market (Sarżyńska-Mazurek, 2018). It is therefore essential that students' preferences and intentions regarding their future careers are supported, adjusted, or refined by professionals – namely, educational and career counsellors. However, the findings of this study indicate that individuals responsible for providing educational support do not play a key role in the educational and career decision-making of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents.

In light of this, schools and career counsellors should assume responsibility for guiding young people through the process of exploring,

evaluating, and matching their personal interests, talents, and physical and mental capabilities with real-world opportunities and labour market demands. This is particularly important given that the majority of respondents frequently reflect on their future careers – a tendency that can be seen as an outcome of the educational process. Designing a life plan is a challenging and long-term endeavor. Therefore, career guidance and counseling should be implemented in a thoughtful, systematic, and thorough manner (Parzęcki, 2004).

In the case of students migrating from Ukraine, schools should be required to provide psychological support, as many of these young people have experienced trauma as a result of the ongoing war. This support should primarily focus on identifying the often-hidden needs of children and adolescents and providing a constructive, sensitive response (Rafał-Łuniewska, 2022). In order to act as effective guides in the educational process, schools must ensure that students feel safe, accepted, and respected – including respect for their choices – and that they are enthusiastically encouraged to take responsibility for their own futures (Ahmed et al., 2021). At the same time, teachers must acknowledge and respect the cultural distinctiveness of Ukrainian students, which undoubtedly affects the development of their aspirations.

The study highlights a pressing social issue: the difficulty faced by young people who are compelled to plan their futures amid a highly unpredictable reality. The findings may serve as a basis for designing effective educational policies and vocational support programs for adolescents. They may also assist policymakers in Poland and Ukraine in gaining a deeper understanding of young people's needs and in adapting the education system to meet labour market demands. We hope that the issues raised in this article will inspire further research – also in other disciplines – into the challenges faced by adolescents in today's uncertain and rapidly changing world.

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The special role of education in the development of intercultural competences – comparative analysis of the results of interviews with students from different European countries

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Abstract

Research objectives and problem(s): This article aims to describe the role of education in developing students' intercultural competences. The research problem addresses the question: How do students

perceive the importance of education (university studies) in shaping intercultural competences necessary for their future careers?

Research methods: The research methods include a literature review and an analysis of data from individual in-depth interviews conducted with students from Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

Process of argumentation: The article begins by outlining the theoretical background of intercultural education and intercultural competence. This is followed by a description of the research methods, an analysis of the interview results, and a discussion of the findings based on interviews with students from the four participating countries.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Higher education plays an important role in developing students' intercultural competences and serves as the foundation for successfully preparing them to work in culturally diverse environments. Intercultural competence supports successful collaboration in teams composed of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. All interviewed students emphasized the importance of education in enhancing these competences and in preparing them for their professional futures.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Higher education institutions bear the responsibility of preparing students to act flexibly, adaptively, and interculturally in today's workplace. Instructors teaching subjects such as human resource management in culturally diverse settings should pay particular attention to developing students' intercultural competences by shaping their attitudes, behaviors, communication styles, and interpersonal skills. Intercultural competence is essential, and educational activities can foster openness to other cultures, promote appropriate attitudes, and support adaptability.

Introduction

Modern societies are defined by their multicultural character. Awareness of cultural diversity and the ongoing changes in the world has been shaped, in part, by the Council of Europe, which promotes cultural pluralism through policy and action. In a report issued to the Council of Europe during the late 1980s, the European Commission emphasized the need for education that supports the teaching of cultures and languages through an intercultural perspective. Intercultural education, according to the report, should be regarded as an ultimate goal. However, this goal should not be pursued simply by increasing the amount of information

in the curriculum. Instead, the Commission advocated for the introduction of methods, principles, and approaches designed to nurture empathy and mutual understanding (Nikitorowicz, 2017).

Since intercultural education has been established as a fundamental objective, it is worthwhile to analyze its complexities further. As globalization accelerates and international business operations expand, the ability to manage cultural differences has never been more important. Strong intercultural skills help multinational companies thrive on the global stage and enable diverse teams to work together effectively. For students, developing these competencies is particularly important as it prepares them for their future careers in culturally diverse workplaces and for the challenges of an interconnected world.

Intercultural Education

For the purposes of this discussion, education will be understood in line with Zbigniew Kwieciński's (1999, p. 89) definition as "the sum of influences shaping individuals and groups, enabling them to develop to their fullest potential and become conscious, creative members of social, cultural, and national communities. Education also supports the realization of one's identity and selfhood through tasks that transcend personal interests. ... It is both the process of guiding others toward higher stages of development and their active engagement in reaching their full potential. It encompasses all activities and processes that contribute to growth, along with their outcomes the achieved level of competence, identity, and agency." This definition accentuates the broad scope of education and its transformative role in shaping individuals and social groups. Education promotes holistic development and helps people grow into active members of society, both culturally and nationally, as they pursue personal fulfillment.

One specific field of education is intercultural education, which Dorothea Markowska (1990, p. 20) defines as: "an educational and formative process designed to enhance students' understanding of cultural differences

ranging from subcultures in one's own community to the distant cultures of other societies and to prepare individuals for dialogical interaction with people from other cultures. By promoting critical reflection, this process seeks to strengthen one's cultural identity." This definition delineates the key goals and tasks of intercultural education, particularly the cultivation of intercultural competencies.

As Mirosław S. Szymański (1995) asserts, the principal objectives of intercultural education include openness to the world; cultivating global communication among people of different races, languages, religions, origins, traditions, and lifestyles; promoting peace, equality, solidarity, and brotherhood both locally and globally; advocacy for a just world free from war, oppression, and hunger; and raising ecological awareness. At its core, intercultural education seeks to dismantle cultural superiority and supports dialogue, mutual exchange, and the breakdown of barriers. It emphasizes respect for diverse lifestyles, tolerance, the rejection of stereotypes and prejudice, and resistance to discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and hostility.

Danuta Waloszek (2021) posits that education not only responds to the needs of the present, but also shapes reality. She describes it as an integral element of social, cultural, and civilizational processes. Wolfgang Brezinka (2005) similarly points out that cultural education has become increasingly relevant to contemporary pedagogy, especially as teachers are more frequently encountering students from families with diverse cultural backgrounds. Brezinka argues that education cannot be divorced from culture: "Humans are cultural and social beings, conditioned by history and tradition. Their existence depends on what they have inherited, on the collective wealth created by their ancestors" (Brezinka, 2005, p. 9). Culture and tradition, therefore, are formative in influencing individuals, social groups, and nations.

Ewa Sowa-Behtane (2018) argues that intercultural education – understood as all activities aimed at learning about and becoming open to other cultures, with the main goal of building tolerance, understanding, and appreciation for groups who differ from us in terms of race, nationality, gender, or religion, as well as developing the ability to coexist and

cooperate with others – should be a particularly important element at every stage of education.

The benefits of intercultural education include the following:

- It encourages curiosity about cultural and social differences;
- It helps develop and support imagination by normalizing difference;
- It promotes critical thinking by enabling individuals to gain perspective on – and question – their own cultural practices;
- It cultivates sensitivity;
- It helps prevent racism (Tormey, 2005).

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence defined as the ability to collaborate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, openness to diversity, and adaptability in multicultural environments has long been recognized by scholars as a key element of university education (Catarci and Fiorucci, 2015; Chen, 2022; Hang and Zhang, 2023; Mara, 2021). The general objective of intercultural education is to develop intercultural competence and build an inclusive, culturally diverse society. Achieving this requires equipping students with the skills that are both required and indispensable for managing cultural differences, as well as providing access to knowledge that supports effective problem-solving in culturally diverse environments. Intercultural education should follow the principles of encouragement, motivation, guidance, and sensitivity. Equally important is the development of positive attitudes, cultural awareness, skills and the ability to recognize cultural differences, as well as understanding their social implications. These holistic principles should inform both its theoretical goals and practical implementation to enhance its benefit for society and individuals (Grzybowski, 2007).

Scholars outline three key areas of focus for intercultural education: awareness, attitudes, and skills. In the area of awareness, goals include building and strengthening social bonds, reinforcing self-identity and

individuality, promoting environmental consciousness, and cultivating a sense of equality and mutual respect across cultures. In terms of attitudes, intercultural education aims to cultivate empathy, global openness, and a commitment to peace while countering xenophobia, racism, discrimination, cultural superiority, prejudice, and nationalism. These goals also emphasize tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to embrace differences with tolerance, and recognize society as a complex intersection of unique individuals. In the domain of skills, main objectives include strengthening intergroup relationships, implementing support systems to solve problems, mastering effective communication strategies such as dialogue and negotiation, recognizing injustice, and broadening personal horizons by learning about and understanding other cultures. Self-acceptance is also a key goal in this domain (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2016).

Intercultural competence is defined by a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In terms of knowledge, it includes understanding diverse global cultures; recognizing how cultural differences influence human behavior; being aware of cultural norms and patterns, interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication cues, and reflecting on the cultural influences shaping one's own worldview. In the domain of skills, intercultural competence involves the ability to adapt one's behavior to different cultural contexts, solve problems in cross-cultural scenarios, interpret foreign cultural practices, establish positive intercultural relationships, actively listen, collaborate in multicultural teams, and identify the mechanisms behind prejudice. When it comes to attitudes, it entails a tolerance for diversity, respect for cultural differences, intellectual curiosity about other cultures, openness to new experiences, a collaborative mindset, a commitment to personal and professional growth, and the ability to approach educational challenges with creativity, flexibility, innovation, and non-traditional methods (Szempruch and Blachnik, 2018).

Contemporary management and the effective fulfillment of tasks and objectives in a multicultural environment require awareness of cultural differences, tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and the ability of both employees and managers to recognize these differences in everyday work

(Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2020; Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). Therefore, teaching and developing intercultural competence in today's students is a necessary prerequisite for preventing prejudice and stereotypes in multicultural workplaces. In conclusion, intercultural competence represents a comprehensive set of abilities, behaviors, and knowledge that, when applied appropriately, enable individuals to engage in constructive cross-cultural interactions and resolve conflicts arising in culturally diverse environments (Mara, 2021; Sacharczuk and Szwarc, 2020; Wolff and Borzikowsky, 2018).

Methodology

As outlined in the abstract, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of education in promoting students' intercultural competence. The research seeks to answer a central question: *How do students perceive the importance of education (their studies) in developing the intercultural competences that are essential for their future careers?*

The interviews were conducted with the intent of eliciting information to approaching this research problem. During these discussions, students answered key prompts, such as:

- What does "intercultural competence" mean to you?
- How important is education in promoting intercultural competence, in your opinion?

The interviews described in this article were conducted in 2024. During April and May, six in-depth individual interviews were carried out with Polish students and another six with Spanish students. Later, between September and November, six in-depth individual interviews were held with Italian students and six with Portuguese students. Altogether, 24 interviews were completed, providing a starting point for a more extensive study on the role and significance of education in developing intercultural competencies in students.

The study was qualitative. The authors employed a semi-structured interview method, utilizing the technique of in-depth individual interviews. It is important to note that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand a given phenomenon, rather than to measure its scale (Bendkowski, 2016, pp. 30–31). Despite certain limitations, in-depth interviews are widely regarded as a valuable source of information on the subjective meanings that respondents assign to particular phenomena or objects.

To identify participants, the researchers used non-probability sampling based on their own informed judgment (Szreder, 2004, p. 45). In line with the methodology of Miszczak and Walasek (2013, p. 103), purposive sampling was used. Snowball sampling was also used, in which a participant is asked to refer the researcher to one or more additional individuals who may be willing to take part in the study. In this way, the sample is gradually expanded (Sęk, 2015, p. 60). The main advantage of this approach is that it allows researchers to reach individuals who meet specific criteria, particularly in situations where no comprehensive list exists or when such individuals are otherwise difficult to access (Szreder, 2004).

At the outset of each interview, all participants were informed of the study’s purpose, the methods and techniques involved, and issues related to anonymity and confidentiality. They were also told how their responses would be used.

Tables 1 and 2 below provide a breakdown of the process through which these interviews were conducted.

Table 1. Methods of conducting interviews with students

Interview Method	Polish students	Spanish students
Face-to-face meetings	4	3
On-line interviews	2	3

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

Four interviews with Polish students were conducted as in-person meetings, while two were carried out using the ZOOM application.

Similarly, three interviews with Spanish students were conducted face-to-face, and three took place via ZOOM. These formats and their distribution are outlined in the table below.

Table 2. Methods of conducting interviews with students

Interview Method	Italian Students	Portuguese Students
Face-to-face meetings	6	0
On-line interviews	0	6

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

The interviews with six Italian students were conducted as in-person meetings, while the six interviews with Portuguese students were held using the ZOOM application. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. At the outset, the researchers informed each student about the purpose of the interview, the research method, and the techniques used. They also explained issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and the use of the responses; specifically, the intention to prepare one or two preliminary publications that would pave the way for more comprehensive future research.

The interviews with Polish students were held in Polish. For Spanish students, they took place in both Spanish and English, while Italian students participated in interviews held in Italian and English. In contrast, the interviews with Portuguese students were carried out entirely in English. All interviews followed the same standardized script, which was developed in advance by the researchers. Recordings were not made during the sessions; instead, the authors took detailed notes throughout the process. The gathered material underwent qualitative and quantitative analysis. The characteristics of the Polish, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese students who participated in the interviews are detailed in Tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3. Characteristics of respondents (Polish and Spanish Students)

Criterion	Polish students	Spanish students
Age	20–23	19–22
Women	4	3
Men	2	3
Faculty	Management: 4 students Tourism and Recreation: 2 students	Business Administration: 2 International Business: 2 Tourism: 2
Specialty	Human Resource Management: 1 Business Management: 1 Services Management: 1 Marketing and Sales: 1 Hospitality and Health Tourism: 1 E-Business in Tourism: 1	Public Administration Management: 1 International Relations: 1 International Marketing: 2 Tourism Management: 1 Business Tourism: 1

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

Table 4. Characteristics of respondents (Italian and Portuguese Students)

Criterion	Italian students	Portuguese students
Age	21–37	21–32
Women	3	4
Men	3	2
Faculty	Management: 2 students Economics: 4 students	Management: 4 Tourism and Recreation: 2
Specialty	International Relations: 2 Postdoctoral Research: 1 PhD Course in Economics, Culture and the Environment: 1 PhD in Economic Sciences: 2	Business Management: 2 Marketing and Sales: 2 International Tourism Management: 2

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

Intercultural Competence – Insights from Student Interviews Across Europe

The table below presents the responses from Polish and Spanish students regarding their understanding of the term “intercultural competence.”

**Table 5. Students’ answers to Question 1:
Definition of intercultural competence**

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Polish Students	Spanish Students
Student 1	Knowledge of other cultures and the ability to act effectively in an intercultural environment	Ability and skills to adapt and interact quickly in an environment with cultural differences
Student 2	Skills to function and communicate effectively in diverse cultural contexts	An attitude characterized by openness and respect for cultural differences; sensitivity to cultural differences and respectful communication
Student 3	Knowledge of different cultures, communication skills and a tolerant, open attitude towards other cultures	Ability to interact effectively with people from culturally diverse backgrounds; openness to and acceptance of cultural differences
Student 4	Open, sensitive perception and understanding of different cultural patterns, interacting respectfully with representatives of other cultures, acknowledging and valuing their differences	Knowledge of different cultures and the ability to function flexibly in different cultural contexts, with an understanding of cultural differences
Student 5	Ability to perceive cultural differences and ability to function in a culturally diverse environment; sensitivity to and acceptance of cultural differences	Knowledge of other cultures, ability to relate to people from other cultures; understanding of other values and behaviour in relation to other cultures
Student 6	Openness, tact and tolerance in building relationships with representatives of other cultures; ability to apply knowledge and competences in building relationships with representatives of other cul-	tures Knowledge, skills and behaviors that enable one to function flexibly and effectively in an intercultural environment, as well as solve various problems that arise from cultural differences

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

Both Polish and Spanish students perceive intercultural competences as a complex combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective functioning in multicultural environments. Respondents from both groups highlighted the importance of understanding other cultures: their norms, values, and behaviors. They indicated that such knowledge is the basis for building relationships and avoiding misunderstandings.

Many students, especially those from Spain, emphasized the importance of adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to respond quickly in intercultural situations. Similarly, Polish students underscored the value of effective communication and the capacity to function in culturally diverse contexts. Both groups strongly emphasized openness, sensitivity, and tolerance toward cultural differences. Students associated intercultural

competence with an attitude of respect for diversity, which allows for building positive relationships with people from other cultures.

Some respondents, especially Polish students, also drew attention to the practical dimension of intercultural competences, i.e. the ability to apply knowledge and attitudes in real-life intercultural interactions. Despite certain differences in emphasis (such as the Spanish students’ stronger focus on adaptability and problem-solving), both groups shared a similar understanding of intercultural competence as the ability to act effectively in culturally diverse environments, based on knowledge, empathy, flexibility, and openness.

The next table presents the responses of Italian and Portuguese students regarding their interpretations of the term “intercultural competence.”

**Table 6. Students’ answers to Question 1:
Definition of intercultural competence**

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 1	Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations; it is underpinned by specific attitudes and affective traits, as well as intercultural knowledge, skills and reflections.	An understanding of cultural differences and the ability to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating sensitivity and openness to these differences
Student 2	The ability to work, communicate and understand people from different backgrounds	Competencies that enable effective engagement in culturally diverse environments, including openness and sensitivity in interpersonal interactions and an understanding and acceptance of different communicative styles
Student 3	In my view, it is a skill that makes you confident and effective when working/studying/living in multicultural settings (environments, people, and rules etc). It means that you think and act in a way that shows respect and understanding of other cultures, even if it may seem strange to you. So if you have this skill, you are able to accept cultural differences and diversity and thus communicate with representatives of other cultures positively without barriers.	The ability to form meaningful relationships with individuals from different cultures, characterized by openness, respect for cultural differences, and effective communication despite cultural barriers

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 4	Intercultural competence is the process through which individuals from different backgrounds – such as language, race, religion, and economic status – interact effectively and respectfully with one another.	Knowledge, openness, and tolerance as foundations for building constructive relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, alongside practical application of cultural knowledge
Student 5	The ability to interact effectively with people from culturally diverse backgrounds; acceptance of cultural differences	Openness and sensitivity to cultural differences, informed by knowledge of other cultures and the ability to establish meaningful connections
Student 6	Knowledge of other cultures and the ability to relate to people from other cultures; the ability to adapt quickly in an environment of cultural differences	The ability to collaborate successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds, facilitated by cultural awareness, openness, and acceptance of diversity

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

Both Italian and Portuguese students understand intercultural competence as a combination of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable effective and respectful interaction in culturally diverse environments. Students from both countries point to the importance of knowing other cultures and being aware of cultural differences. This is seen as the basis for building positive relationships and for effective intercultural communication.

Many students (e.g., Italian students 2 and 3; Portuguese students 3 and 6) emphasize that intercultural competence involves the ability to communicate successfully, collaborate, and form relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds – despite potential language barriers or differing communication styles. Attitudes such as openness, acceptance, empathy, and tolerance of cultural differences are strongly emphasized. Students point out that without these attitudes, it is difficult to speak of true intercultural competence (as noted, for example, by Portuguese students 2, 3, 4, and 5).

Both Italian and Portuguese respondents refer to the practical application of intercultural competence: in the workplace, in academic settings, and in everyday life (Italian students 3 and 4). These competences

enable individuals not only to understand others but also to respond effectively and appropriately in situations involving cultural differences. The responses of Italian and Portuguese students are consistent and mutually reinforcing. They perceive intercultural competence as a complex process of learning and action that requires knowledge, practical skills, and mature interpersonal attitudes. Across all contexts, students identify respect for diversity, flexibility, and a willingness to collaborate across cultural boundaries as crucial elements.

Table 7 presents a range of responses from Polish and Spanish students on the significance of education in cultivating their intercultural competencies.

Table 7. Students’ answers to question 2: The importance of education

The Importance of Education	Polish students	Spanish students
Student 1	Education is fundamental for the development of students’ intercultural competence. It should promote openness to diversity and build understanding and respect for different cultures.	Education is very important because it contributes to the development of knowledge about other cultures and creates proper conditions for developing competences necessary for successful integration into a culturally diverse environments.
Student 2	Higher education should prepare people for working in multicultural environments. It should shape open-minded attitudes, raise sensitivity to cultural diversity, and help students overcome stereotypes in future work settings.	Education (particularly university classes) is very important because it shapes attitudes, develops skills, and broadens knowledge, which all help build intercultural relationships and increase sensitivity to other cultures.
Student 3	The role of higher education is essential for the development of intercultural competences. Such education should provide necessary and practical knowledge for working effectively in multicultural environments. It should cultivate openness to other cultures and prepare students for cooperation with representatives of other cultures.	University education is fundamental because it should prepare students for the effective use of knowledge and skills in professional environments. It should facilitate functioning in culturally diverse teams by providing both knowledge about different cultures and experiences, such as Erasmus programs and exposure to other cultures).
Student 4	Higher education plays a special role in the development of intercultural competence and should contribute to the acquisition of knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes that are indispensable for future professional work and successful functioning in multicultural environments.	University courses play an important role in building intercultural competence. The knowledge, skills, experiences gained during this period influence how open and sensitive we become to interacting with other cultures; how effective we are in solving difficult situations in multicultural cooperation.

The Importance of Education	Polish students	Spanish students
Student 5	Education is the basis for the development of intercultural competences. It should effectively prepare us for work in intercultural environments by equipping us with the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in multicultural teams.	The role of education is particularly important for developing intercultural competence. Education should improve practical knowledge necessary for open collaboration and interaction in culturally diverse work environments. It should develop skills and attitudes for building positive relationships with representatives of different cultures.
Student 6	Education should expand knowledge about other cultures, develop competences for effective intercultural engagement in the future workplace, teach appropriate behaviour and tolerance, and support the development of meaningful intercultural relationships.	Education should provide a sense of security and confidence in dealing with other cultures by offering knowledge, skills, and behavioral guidelines. The attitudes acquired during studies should later contribute to building effective intercultural relationships, improving communication skills, and solving problems in professional environments.

Source: Interviews conducted with the Polish and Spanish students

Students stress that education is the basis for building knowledge about other cultures, fostering openness, and preparing for life and work in culturally diverse environments (Polish: Students 1, 3, 5; Spanish: Students 1, 3, 5). According to the respondents, education should cultivate practical skills, cultural knowledge, and essential attitudes such as openness, tolerance, and cultural sensitivity: that are necessary for successful intercultural interaction. References to preparation for professional work in multicultural settings appear very frequently in the responses from both groups. Polish students (Students 2 and 6) note that education should help overcome stereotypes, promote tolerance, and teach appropriate behavior towards people from other cultures. Spanish students (Students 2 and 4) emphasize the role of education in building relationships and coping with difficult intercultural situations.

Compared to their Polish peers, Spanish students more frequently point to the practical aspects of education – such as participation in international programs (e.g., Erasmus) – as vital for deepening engagement with other cultures and having a real impact on the development of intercultural competences (Spanish: Students 3 and 4). Responses from both groups consistently affirm that education, especially at the university level,

plays a key role in developing intercultural competence. It should not only impart knowledge but, more importantly, shape attitudes of openness and tolerance, strengthen communication skills, and prepare students to function effectively in multicultural environments, both personally and professionally.

Table 8 presents the responses of Italian and Portuguese students on how education contributes to the development of their intercultural competencies.

**Table 8. Students’ answers to Question 2:
The importance of education**

The Importance of Education	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 1	Education is essential for learning the concepts and language necessary to engage with other cultures.	Education is essential for developing intercultural competence. It should equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in multicultural environments and prepare them for careers that increasingly involve working in diverse cultural contexts.
Student 2	Education is for developing attitudes, knowledge and skills.	Education plays a key role in developing intercultural competence. It should teach understanding and respect for different cultures.
Student 3	Education is necessary to enhance the ability to work with people from different backgrounds and to increase awareness and understanding of different cultures for efficient communication.	Education should provide knowledge about other cultures and countries. It should create conditions for developing skills and behaviors that make it easier to function in culturally diverse professional settings.
Student 4	Education offers a great opportunity to broaden communication, share knowledge, and conduct research.	Education should promote openness to other cultures and nationalities. It should equip us with the skills needed to handle situations involving people from diverse backgrounds when misunderstandings and conflicts are likely to arise.
Student 5	Educational institutions play an important role in developing intercultural competence. They can help increase knowledge about other cultures and improve one's understanding of the words, actions, and behaviors of people from different backgrounds. I also think that one's immediate surroundings, such as family, relatives, and friends, significantly influence how intercultural competence develops over time.	Education plays a vital role in developing intercultural competence. It should effectively prepare us for working in a globalized world, in professional environments where people from different cultures collaborate.

The Importance of Education	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 6	From a student's standpoint, education is fundamental in fostering intercultural interaction by equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and experiences that promote understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures. Through exposure to different viewpoints, friendly dialogue, and collaboration with individuals from various backgrounds, education strengthens respect, compassion, and effective interpersonal communication across cultures.	Education is especially important because it provides knowledge about other cultures, helps develop intercultural competence, and opens minds to cultural differences.

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

Students assert that education should provide knowledge about other cultures, countries, and ways of life (all respondents from both groups). This knowledge forms the foundation for developing cultural awareness and a better understanding of different behaviors and attitudes. In the responses of both groups, there is a clear emphasis on the role of education in developing openness, respect, empathy, and a willingness to engage in dialogue with people from other cultures (Italian students: 2, 6; Portuguese: 2, 4, 6).

Education should facilitate understanding of diversity and contribute to the elimination of prejudice. Students expect that it will prepare them for effective communication and collaboration in culturally diverse professional settings (Italian students: 3, 5, 6; Portuguese: 1, 3, 5). They stress the need to acquire specific skills that support functioning in a globalized world.

Some students note that education is not only about transmitting knowledge, but also about offering opportunities to experience cultural diversity in practice; for example, through dialogue, collaboration in international environments, or confrontation with different points of view (Italian student 6; Portuguese student 6). Italian student 5 also pointed to the importance of one's immediate environment (family, friends) in developing intercultural competences, as a complement to formal education.

The responses of Italian and Portuguese students clearly indicate that education plays a fundamental role in shaping intercultural competence. It should not only provide knowledge and skills but also cultivate attitudes of openness, understanding, and readiness to collaborate in a culturally diverse world. Education should function not only as a space for learning, but also for experiencing interculturalism in practice.

Tables 7 and 8 above summarize the responses of students from four European countries Poland, Spain, Italy, and Portugal regarding the impact of education on their intercultural competencies. The students uniformly described education as “essential, very important, and fundamental” for developing these skills. They consistently view education as vital for preparing them to tackle future challenges and work in culturally diverse environments. All responses clearly indicate that students are aware of the significance of education in enhancing their intercultural competencies.

Discussion

Interviews conducted with Polish, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese students provided insight into the research question: *How do students perceive the role of education in developing intercultural competencies necessary for their future careers?* All participating students emphasized the importance of education in strengthening these competencies and preparing them for professional work in culturally diverse settings.

The findings indicate that students’ limited intercultural skills may be partly attributed to a lack of systemic approaches to intercultural education and insufficient programs that promote the development of such competencies at universities (e.g., Bem, 2020). The importance of education in advancing intercultural competencies especially in the context of future careers in multicultural environments has been examined by numerous scholars (Knap-Stefaniuk and Burkiewicz, 2021; Nikitorowicz, 2019; Sacharczuk and Szwarc, 2020). This topic continues to grow in relevance, particularly given the effects of globalization and the increasing internationalization of contemporary business operations. According to

researchers, education plays a major role in fostering openness to cultural differences, strengthening adaptive skills, dismantling stereotypes, and, most importantly, nurturing sensitivity to other cultures.

Limitations and Future Research

The authors recognize that the qualitative approach taken in this study limits the generalizability of its findings. Nonetheless, this research represents an important starting point in evaluating the impact of education on the development of students' intercultural competencies. Future research should include other European countries and regions beyond Europe to capture the perspectives of students from diverse cultural backgrounds on the development of intercultural competencies.

Conclusion

As Berg and Paigne (2009, p. 431) note, it is only through genuine awareness and understanding of cultural differences achieved through proper education and experience that individuals can begin to perceive such differences as positive, interesting, and beneficial. The role of education in this process is indispensable, as developing intercultural competencies requires not only acquiring skills but also promoting open-minded attitudes and embracing lifelong learning (Deardorff, 2009). Modern education systems must equip future professionals and managers with more than just theoretical knowledge; they must cultivate adaptability, curiosity, and the ability to excel in multicultural workplaces.

Intercultural competence, which involves the ability to critically analyze unfamiliar cultural phenomena, learn through observation and interaction, and succeed in diverse communicative contexts, is fundamental for engaging with new experiences and cultures. It also encompasses the understanding of different value systems, appropriate conduct in intercultural interactions, and the capacity to manage intercultural

misunderstandings and conflicts while overcoming stereotypes. According to the authors, developing intercultural competences is vital for full participation in the life of modern societies and for successful functioning in modern professional environments. With these skills, individuals can swiftly adapt to culturally diverse settings and collaborate effectively across borders. Ultimately, the knowledge, attitudes, and skills gained through education are invaluable as they directly enhance the quality of future intercultural interactions.

The development of intercultural competences is fundamental in increasingly multicultural society. Educational activities facilitate the cultivation of openness to different cultures, appropriate attitudes, and adaptability. In the authors' view, education plays a crucial role in fostering sensitivity to cultural differences.

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Cross-cultural communication competence of students in the unique context of the Polish–Czech borderland

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this study was to identify differences in the level and determinants of intercultural communication competence among school pupils in the Polish–Czech border region. Specifically, we sought to determine whether statistically significant differences exist among the study groups, and which variables – such as environment, gender, faith, national identity, and community affiliation – shape intercultural communication skills.

Research methods: The study employed a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire. It involved 464 participants across three groups: pupils from bilingual schools in the Czech Republic [A], pupils from Polish schools located near the border [B], and a control group of pupils from public schools in the Silesian Voivodeship.

Keywords:

cross-cultural
communication
competence;
Zaolzie region;
intercultural
communication;
bilingual education;
youth cultural identity

Process of argumentation: Zaolzie represents a borderland with a unique cultural identity and a longstanding tradition of multiculturalism. This raises the question of whether, in such an environment, students' levels of intercultural communication competence differ from those in other regions, or whether their declared views are shaped by different variables.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study found that the local context – the environment in which respondents were raised and educated, situated at the cultural and national border between Poland and the Czech Republic – does not significantly influence their level of intercultural communication competence or their expectations regarding intercultural education. The data indicate that students' competences are similar to those of adolescents from other regions, and that beliefs, views, and attitudes toward multiculturalism are only minimally affected by the examined variables.

Introduction

Competence is multidimensional, dynamic, and multifaceted in nature. It is a key conceptual category in pedagogy as the science of education and upbringing. Indeed, the aim of education in its broadest sense is to cultivate competences that enable the optimal development of each individual – not only in the society in which they live but also in new environments to which they may need to adapt (Świdzińska & Maliszewski, 2019, p. 162). Exploring the issue of competence is particularly relevant today, given the practical implications of education and cross-cultural communication in an era of mass migration flows and socio-political polarization.

Today, multiculturalism or cultural diversity is a widespread phenomenon, yet it remains a challenge for institutionalized education. On one hand, this is the result of increasing processes such as displacement, migration, the refugee crisis, family reunification, and travel driven by cognitive, educational, and cultural motivations, natural curiosity about other cultures, and the opening of borders. On the other hand, it demonstrates the universal values shared by Generations Y and Z, for whom – irrespective of their place of residence – multiculturalism is a self-evident,

foundational reality (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014, p. 489). In addition to these contemporary processes, a historical perspective also persists, in which multiculturalism is understood through the lenses of difference, ethnicity, proximity, borderland life, direct and indirect contact, and a sense of place or geographical rootedness (Rawal & Deardorff, 2021).

The Polish–Czech border region provides a compelling case study. Zaolzie, in particular, is a model example of a borderland environment with a distinct cultural identity, shaped by the centuries-long coexistence and blending of Polish and Czech cultural elements (Zormanová, 2018). In Zaolzie, the Polish population has surpassed the 10% threshold¹ required to introduce bilingualism in 30 municipalities, including Bystrzyca, Český Těšín, Gnojník, Jablunkov, Mosty koło Jablunkova, Ropica, Stonava, Horní Suchá, and Třinec.² Today, bicultural schools operate in these areas – where the present study was conducted – which offer Polish as the first language of instruction and Czech as a second language. The children and youth who attend these schools most often identify as members of a national minority and describe themselves as bilingual (Hopkins et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2023a).

A number of classifications of borderland can be found in the literature. One such classification is the typology proposed by Jerzy Nikitorowicz (2014, pp. 180–182), which distinguishes between territorial borderlands, cultural-content borderlands, interactional borderlands, and personal–internal borderlands. This article adopts an understanding of borderland in interactional terms, which is considered the broadest of these perspectives. A defining feature of this perspective is the presence – not necessarily dependent on a shared sense of community, common language, customs, or history – of mutual understanding and dialogue, interaction, and a shared “will to know.” This is seen as a continuous process of interpersonal communication that progresses from monologue to cultural dialogue, and from the dominance of stereotypes and prejudices to mutual understanding, tolerance, and recognition (Nikitorowicz, 2014, p. 181).

¹ Data source: Czech Statistical Office; National Census of Population and Housing.

² Project website: <https://zaolzieteraz.kc-cieszyn.pl/> project website: “Zaolzie teraz”.

According to Karlfried Knapp and Annelie Knapp-Potthoff, intercultural competence refers to “the competent perception of others and oneself, i.e. perceiving the connections between the way others think and behave and one’s own with culturally specific cognitive constructs” (Linka, 2011, p. 88). Along similar lines, intercultural communication competence is defined as “a set of beliefs, habits, and skills that allow individuals to function effectively in a multicultural environment” (Misiejuk, 2013, p. 37). Recognizing multiculturalism as a given, intercultural communication competences are thus human predispositions that are continuously developed through interaction and socialization. They comprise a complex set of skills that condition an individual’s ability to function effectively in diverse social situations shaped by cultural differences.

In investigating the cross-cultural communication competence of students in this region, we relied on classical theoretical frameworks. One of them is the classification provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which identifies four core areas: *Savoir-être* (social and affective skills), *Savoir-apprendre* (learning how to learn), *Savoir* (socio-cultural knowledge), and *Savoir-faire* (practical skills). The measurement tool used in this study was based on the first and third of these areas.

In addition, the study applied a second framework for cross-cultural competence, specifically the area related to social and cultural competency. This included three components: (a) positive attitudes toward different linguistic and cultural groups, (b) empathy, and (c) cultural and linguistic flexibility.

Methodology

The study was conducted as part of a collaborative project between WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza (Poland) and the University of California, San Diego, from October 2022 to March 2023. The project was titled “Socio-Cultural Competences and Competences in the Area of Inter-cultural Communication in the Cross-Border Environment of Bilingual Schools on

the Polish–Czech Border.” The study was explanatory in nature. Its main objective was to identify and compare the level of cross-cultural communication competence among school pupils (aged 14–18) in a specific region (Zaolzie, the Czech–Polish borderland) and in a specific institutional context (upper elementary and general-profile secondary schools). Competence was assessed by comparing three independent groups of respondents: pupils from Polish schools in the Czech Republic, referred to as “border schools” [A], pupils from Polish schools located in the border region (Cieszyn and its surroundings) [B] and a control group composed of Polish schools in towns with similar characteristics in the Silesian voivodeship [C].

Tools used to collect data on attitudes toward dilemmas, cultural problems, or differences often focus on specific characteristics that are of particular interest to the researcher. Consequently, they cannot typically claim a transcultural or supra-cultural quality, as each culture is unique and represents a complex, often poorly defined variable. Therefore, in cross-cultural research, an accurate and objective description of reality requires consideration of many contextual variables. Only by identifying and quantifying these variables can researchers statistically explain observed differences (Matsumoto & Juang, 2007, pp. 47–84).

In line with this, we also decided to examine and compare pupils’ self-declared values and attitudes using a custom research instrument, developed based on well-established measurement methods in academic literature (Nikitorowicz et al., 2013; Chromiec, 2006; Nikitorowicz, 2013; Ferszt-Piłat, 2015; Hopkins et al., 2023a). The questionnaire took into account a wide range of factors influencing competence, including conditioning variables such as the respondents’ socio-cultural identity (identification profile), the cultural homogeneity of their place of residence, family structure (ethnic and religious composition), and influences related to religion and education.

The study employed purposive random sampling. In the first stage, schools were selected purposively, in accordance with the theoretical assumptions and objectives of the research. The research sample consisted of two categories of schools: bilingual schools with Polish as the language of instruction operating in the Czech Republic, and Polish-language schools

located in the Polish border area, including the Cieszyn region. The selection of schools was non-random, based on substantive and geographical criteria. In the second stage, respondents were randomly selected from among the students at the chosen schools. This means that while the student sample was randomly selected, it was drawn from a predetermined and limited population.

A quantitative research approach was applied, and a diagnostic survey method in the form of an online questionnaire was administered to students during class, accessible via computer, tablet, or phone. The tool consisted of modules that included multiple-choice questions (for nominal variables) and evaluation questions (see Table 1). The reliability and relevance of the instrument were verified using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.75. A total of 464 pupils participated in the study, with the three study groups proportionally represented. The survey allowed us to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the study groups and to address the stated research questions. In the survey, we limited ourselves to declared attitudes and self-reported levels of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding cross-cultural communication in its broadest sense. This included perspectives on migration movements, attitudes towards minorities, intercultural exchange, religions other than Christianity, willingness to work in multicultural teams, openness to alternative narratives, and anxieties related to cultural exchange.

The research issues addressed in the study were as follows:

1. What is the correlation between students' level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the type of institutional environment [ZN1] as well as their sense of community affiliation [ZN2]?
2. How do factors such as type of environment (urban–multicultural vs. rural–traditional) [ZN3], gender [ZN5], religious affiliation [ZN6], religious practice [ZN7], and sense of national identity [ZN8] relate to the above correlations?
3. What is the relationship between the level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the students' sense of cultural identity [ZZ2]?

The sampling method used in the study was subject to certain limitations stemming from both the research strategy and the specific context of the study site. As a result, the sample is not representative of all students in Poland or the Czech Republic. However, it may be considered partially representative of students attending Polish-language schools in the borderland region. The random selection of students within purposively selected schools helped to minimize selection bias and enhance the accuracy of conclusions for the population under investigation. It should be emphasized that all statistical inferences refer only to the specific subpopulation of students attending Polish bilingual schools in the Czech Republic and Polish-language schools in the Polish border region. Because of the purposive nature of the school selection, generalizing the results to the general population of students in Poland or the Czech Republic is not justified.

Table 1. Conceptualization of variables

Variable	Description / conceptualization / scale (only valid)		
ZZ1 - level of cross-cultural communication competence (dependent)	A synthetic indicator built on the declared attitudes and beliefs of respondents (5-point Likert scale, slider between two opposing views/statements)	Total score for answers to 19 specific questions	19–95
ZZ2 - sense of cultural identity (dependent)		Total score for answers given to 12 specific questions	12–60
ZN1 - type of institutional environment	Type of school in a specific region	– Border regions (Polish schools in Czechia; Polish schools in borderland area) – Schools in non-border regions	
ZN2 - sense of community affiliation	A synthetic indicator built similarly to ZZ1/ZZ2	Total score for answers to 7 specific questions (Likert scale selection slider)	5–33
ZN3 - type of environment	Declaration in demographic forms	Urban (multicultural) vs. rural or rural-urban	
ZN5 – gender		Girl/woman; boy/man	
ZN6 – declared belief		Believer; non-believer	
ZN7 – declared religious practice		Practicing regularly; irregularly; rarely; never	
ZN8 – declared nationality		Polish; Czech; Silesian	

The project received approval from the departmental research committee (WSBU) and was conducted with careful adherence to ethical standards in social science research. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw from the survey at any point. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and the questionnaire did not include any items that could personally identify them.

Results

The primary dependent variable used as the baseline in this study was “cross-cultural communication competence,” derived as a composite measure. This variable was constructed from responses to questions addressing topics such as attitudes toward migrants and the phenomenon of migration, the level of declared openness and willingness to live, cooperate, study, and spend leisure time with individuals from other cultures, as well as general attitudes toward foreigners, cultural diversity, and other religions. The quantitative index was calculated as the total score based on the respondents' answers. The possible range of scores was from 19 to 95, with lower scores indicating various forms of aversion, fear, or prejudice toward people from other cultures, or a negative or cautious stance toward cultural exchange. Conversely, higher scores indicated approval, openness, and readiness – essentially an affirmation of cross-cultural communication.

Another key variable in the study, ZN2 (sense of community affiliation), was derived from questions related to declared attitudes and orientations toward local and regional traditions, history, and culture. The level of this indicator reflects respondents' pro-regional orientation and their sense of regional identity and belonging, expressed on a linear scale. The analysis highlighted an interesting trend that corresponds with findings in other research and in the broader literature on the subject: a tendency toward homogeneity and universality in the views and attitudes of contemporary youth, regardless of their place of residence or their social, microcultural, or institutional context.

The analysis of the first research question – *What is the correlation between students' level of cross-cultural communication competence [ZZ1] and the type of institutional environment [ZN1] as well as their sense of community affiliation [ZN2]?* – already reveals that the average values of the dependent variable ZZ1 are similar across all three groups represented by the categories of the independent variable ZN1. Therefore, the hypothesis that the institutional environment (i.e., the school setting) and place of residence (as a socialization environment) significantly influence the level of cross-cultural communication competence among the students surveyed was not confirmed.

It is worth noting that the average values for ZN1 are consistent not only within the Polish and Czech border regions – both characterized by similar contextual features – but also within the control group, which consists of students from schools in the Upper Silesian and Zagłębie agglomeration, an area that does not exhibit the distinct characteristics of a borderland. At the same time, it should be noted that these similar results emerged despite the fact that the groups attended schools operating within different national education systems. The schools with Polish as the language of instruction in the Czech Republic are part of the Czech educational system, while the schools in the Polish border region and the Silesian Voivodeship are part of the Polish education system. These systems differ in structure and, most notably, in curriculum content.

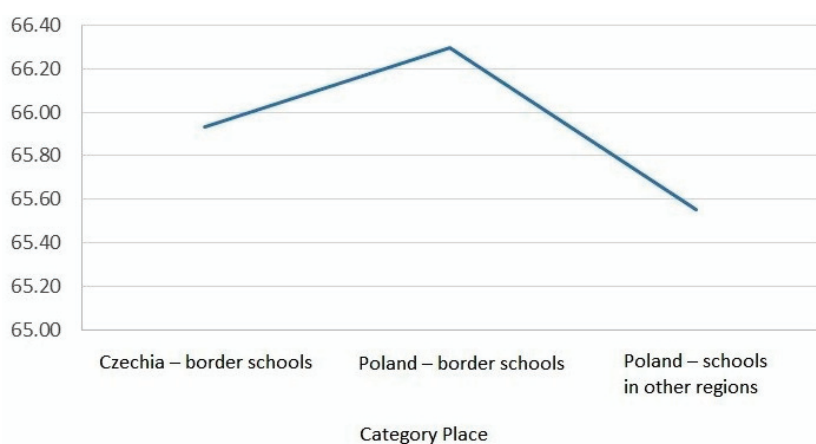
The table below shows the descriptive statistics of the dependent variable ZZ1 in each category of the independent variable ZN1.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for
the dependent variable ZZ1**

Category Place		N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Czechia (A)	Level of cross-cultural communication competence	162	37.00	91.00	65.9321	7.45265
Poland (B)		161	37.00	92.00	66.2981	10.58232
Poland (C)		141	37.00	95.00	65.5519	9.74850

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between the variables ZZ1 (level of competence in multicultural communication) and ZN1 (type of institutional environment). The aim of the analysis was to determine whether the qualitative variable significantly differentiates the mean values of the quantitative dependent variable. The resulting F statistic = 0.251 (p-value = 0.778) indicates that there is no statistically significant effect of the type of institutional environment (ZN1) on the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1).

Chart No. 1. Medium – Level of cultural communication competence, comparison of groups

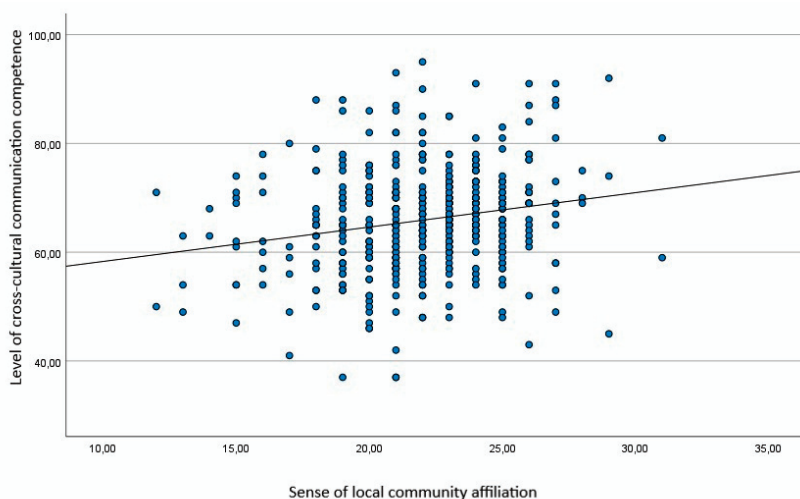


Author's own research, N=464

The assumptions for conducting an ANOVA were verified by testing the normality of the distribution of the dependent variable in groups defined by levels of the qualitative variable. Both the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests were applied, along with the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test. The result of the Kruskal–Wallis test ($H = 1.148$, p-value = 0.563) also confirms that there is no significant effect of the type of institutional environment (ZN1) on the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1).

To examine the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2 (sense of community affiliation), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results ($r = 0.199$; $p < 0.001$) indicate a statistically significant but weak positive correlation between the level of competence in multicultural communication (ZZ1) and the sense of community affiliation (ZN2). The figure below presents a visual illustration of the correlation observed.

Chart No. 2. Relationship between sense of local community affiliation and level of cross-cultural communication competences



Author's own research, N=464

The analysis of the results reveals an important finding: a strong sense of local bonding among students is not associated with closed-mindedness or fear of multiculturalism. On the contrary, attitudes of regionalism and attachment to local and regional values and traditions positively correlate with the respondents' declared openness and willingness to communicate and collaborate with individuals from other cultures.

Problem 2: How do factors such as type of environment (urban–multicultural vs. rural–traditional) [ZN3], gender [ZN5], religious affiliation

[ZN6], religious practice [ZN7], and sense of national identity [ZN8] relate to the above correlations?

The analysis of the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN1 indicated that the correlation is virtually non-existent. Therefore, the focus shifts to the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2. The next step is to assess how this correlation may change under the influence of additional variables, such as place of residence (type of environment), religious beliefs and practices, and sense of national identity. To determine whether these variables have an additional impact on the relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2, a partial correlation coefficient was calculated. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 3 Partial correlation coefficient analysis

Control variables	ZZ1 and ZN2 variables	Partial correlations	ZZ1	ZN2
Place	ZZ1 (Level of cross-cultural communication competences)	Corr.	1	0.199
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2 (Sense of community affiliation)	Corr.	0.199	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Gender	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.199
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.199	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Declared belief	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.203
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.203	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Religious practice	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.194
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.194	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Nationality	ZZ1	Corr.	1	0.197
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZN2	Corr.	0.197	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.

* Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Previous calculations show that the correlation between variables ZZ1 and ZN2 is weak, positive, and statistically significant ($r = 0.199$, $p\text{-value} < 0.001$). Analyzing the results presented in the table above, it can be seen that when the independent variables ZN3, ZN5, ZN6, ZN7, and ZN8 are taken into account, the correlation between ZZ1 and ZN2 remains statistically significant. This indicates that these independent variables do not influence the actual relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2.

We also decided to examine whether there is a correlation between cross-cultural communication competence (ZZ1) and the sense of cultural identity (ZZ2) among the young people surveyed (**Problem 3**). The sense of identity was defined as a composite variable, constructed from the sum of scores derived from responses to a set of 12 Likert-scale questions. Each question was presented in the form of a sliding scale between two polarized statements – one oriented toward a regional perspective (emphasizing the importance of traditions, regionally cultivated values, and local language or dialect, e.g., “I feel more like a citizen of the region,” “regional/local traditions”) and the other leaning strongly toward a global perspective (e.g., “I feel more like a citizen of the world”). To determine the correlation between ZZ1 and ZZ2, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 4. Relationship between ZZ1 and ZN2

		ZZ1	ZN2
Level of cross-cultural communication competences	Pearson's correlation	1	0.147**
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.002
Sense of community affiliation	Pearson's correlation	0.147**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.002	

** . Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). N=464

The results of the correlation analysis ($r = 0.147$, $p\text{-value} = 0.002$) indicate a statistically significant, positive, but weak relationship – an outcome that was somewhat unexpected. One might have anticipated

a stronger positive correlation. Do other variables influence this relationship? To examine this, we conducted a partial correlation analysis. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 5. Results of partial correlation analysis for variables ZZ1 and ZZ2

Control variables	ZZ1 and ZZ2 variables	Partial correlations	ZZ1	ZZ2
Place	ZZ1 (Lev. of cross-cultural comm. comp.)	Correlation	1	0.145
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2 (sense of cultural identity)	Correlation	0.145	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.
Gender	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.145
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.145	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.
Declared belief	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.158
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<0.001*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.158	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001*	.
Religious practice	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.139
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.003*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.139	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003*	.
Nationality	ZZ1	Correlation	1	0.147
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.002*
	ZZ2	Correlation	0.147	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002*	.

* Statistical significance at 0.05.

Analyzing the results presented in the table above, it can be observed that even when the independent variables are taken into account, the correlation between ZZ1 and ZZ2 is still statistically significant. This indicates that the independent variables do not influence the actual relationship between ZZ1 and ZZ2. This observation supports the conclusions drawn from the analysis of Problem 1: the beliefs and attitudes of youth in the area of intercultural communication are not significantly determined by

the type of socialization environment, gender, religious beliefs and practices, or national identity.

Discussion

Since the emergence of intercultural communication competence as a sub-discipline, research in this area has generally gravitated towards the construction of a model based on individual characteristics related to appropriate attitudes and skills in intercultural contexts – such as adaptation, appropriateness, and the effectiveness of one's actions (Abe & Wiseman, 1983, pp. 53–67). A critique of this approach was voiced by Chen and Starosta, who proposed a model of intercultural sensitivity (Chen, 1990; Chen & Starosta, 2012). Their framework introduced three dimensions of competence and provided tools for assessing the relevant skills. The authors likened these competencies to an umbrella that brings together three interrelated capacities: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. These capacities interact as part of a continuous process.

Building on this foundation, they developed a model of intercultural communication competence that integrates three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural proficiency. This model captures not only the individual dimension of competence but also its social and environmental contexts, including factors shaped by the process of socialization. Comparative research on intercultural communication competence in the unique environment of bilingual schools in the Zaolzie region has not been conducted to date. As a result, the findings of the current study provide significant cognitive value but remain difficult to compare. For this reason, further research, especially using the aforementioned standardized tools, represents an important challenge for the future. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to relate these findings to the results of other studies conducted in Poland's border regions (similar to Zaolzie): the meeting point of cultures, languages, and traditions – such as the Polish–Ukrainian, Polish–Belarusian, and Polish–Lithuanian borderlands.

Poland's eastern and western borderlands differ in many respects due to their different historical experiences and past affiliations with different political, economic, and social systems. However, they also share important features, such as a legacy of traditional multiculturalism and religious diversity. A study on intercultural communication competence among young people living in a multicultural region of eastern Poland – inhabited by autochthonous groups of various religious and ethnic backgrounds, and shaped by both historical and ongoing migration – was conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Białystok (Nikitorowicz et al., 2013). The research covered adolescents and their families, with the goal of examining the relationship between intercultural communication competence and factors such as the type of local environment, sense of local belonging, respondents' migration experiences, and the cultural identity of the adolescents. The researchers argued that factors supporting the acquisition of higher intercultural competence include the structure and type of family bonds, which are conducive to the cognitive and emotional stimulation of young people. These include parental education, a partnership-based family dynamic, and a democratic parenting style.

Świdzińska (2013) brought to light the problem of low intercultural competence among teachers and students in the traditionally multicultural and borderland region of Lublin. Joint school activities carried out as part of an educational project created opportunities to share knowledge about local cultural differences and experiences with project-based learning in both schools and local communities. At the same time, they revealed a noticeable lack of such content in formal education. Schools in the Lublin region – particularly in rural areas and small towns – do include topics related to regional, intercultural, and European education, but this is typically the result of individual teachers' initiatives or participation in EU-funded projects (often in cooperation with NGOs), rather than an outcome of systemic or curricular solutions (Świdzińska, 2013).

An insightful study using the Scale of Intercultural Sensitivity (Korczyński & Świdzińska, 2017) was conducted in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland in 2017. The research identified differences between Polish and

Ukrainian students in three aspects of intercultural sensitivity: respect for cultural differences, confidence in interaction, and enjoyment of interaction. No statistically significant differences were found in engagement in interaction or attentiveness during interaction. However, statistically significant results were observed in the other three areas. The authors concluded that the Ukrainian students exhibited a significantly higher level of intercultural sensitivity than their Polish peers. This is most likely due to the fact that Ukrainian students were living in a culturally different environment. As temporary residents in another country, their determination to achieve educational goals appeared to motivate stronger efforts to develop coexistence, negotiation, and cooperation skills when interacting with culturally diverse peers (Korczyński & Świdzińska, 2017).

Similar findings emerged from a study conducted in Lublin involving Polish and Belarusian youth. The aim of the study was to identify differences in intercultural sensitivity among students living in the Polish–Belarusian borderland region. The research was based on Chen and Starosta's (2012) model of intercultural communication competence, which comprises three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural proficiency. The study showed that Belarusian students scored higher in several aspects of intercultural sensitivity, particularly in the confidence in interaction dimension. Across individual dimensions – except for attentiveness in interaction – Belarusian students consistently scored higher than their Polish counterparts. The overall sensitivity score for the Belarusian group was also higher. As in the earlier study, these elevated scores can likely be attributed to the students' conscious relocation to a different country for educational purposes. A similar pattern was observed in the current study conducted in Zaolzie, where students attending Polish schools in the Czech Republic – who also represent a minority group – scored slightly higher in intercultural communication competence.

The results obtained closely correspond to the conclusions drawn from a 2009 diagnostic study conducted in schools in the Polish–Ukrainian border region (Długosz, 2009). That research demonstrated that place of residence and nationality are not differentiating factors when it comes

to intercultural communication competence. Young people, regardless of nationality, were found to share similar modern personality traits such as high educational and career aspirations, optimism, mobility, and adaptability to change. Approximately 80% of respondents expressed plans to pursue higher education, which may be indicative of strong life ambitions. One of the defining features of the youth studied was their optimism, confidence in future success, and forward-looking mindset. Based on these findings, the author concluded that multicultural border regions possess their own endogenous sources of change.

Conclusion

Developing intercultural competence is one of the key components of preparing students to live in a pluralistic, open, inclusive, and culturally diverse society. This is, of course, an important task of the modern school, which, as an institution with both educational and formative functions, should develop attitudes of openness and acceptance toward diversity. However, this task requires thoughtful planning, targeted strategies, and methodological precision – because what may seem like a challenge for the school system can often be viewed as self-evident or natural by students themselves. This point was reflected in our study, as the results show a consistently high level of intercultural competence among students, regardless of their educational context. This supports the thesis of homogeneity and the universal nature of values embraced by today's students, irrespective of their place of residence, cultural background, or historical context.

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Multicultural attitudes and beliefs among early education teachers: A comparative study of Poland and Iceland

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The article presents the results of a study conducted in Poland and Iceland. Its aim was to compare the attitudes of early childhood education teachers toward multiculturalism. It also sought to examine the relationship between sociocultural factors and the respondents' multicultural attitudes.

Research methods: A total of 112 early childhood education teachers took part in the study: 53 from Poland and 59 from Iceland. The research was quantitative and used the diagnostic survey method. Data were collected using the International Intercultural Attitudes Scale (MASQUE).

Process of argumentation: This research is valuable because it provides educational managers with knowledge necessary for designing schools that are open to multiculturalism. Moreover, as Byram (2021) suggests, such studies motivate teachers to reflect on their own values and cultural biases, which may influence the quality and effectiveness of multicultural education.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The results showed that teachers from Iceland demonstrated stronger intercultural sensitivity in terms of knowledge, action, and overall attitude index compared to teachers from Poland.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: In a multicultural world, it is essential to develop an open identity, especially as a teacher who acts as a role model of openness to multiculturalism for their students. Teachers with greater openness to cultural diversity are significantly more involved in culturally responsive teaching and intercultural education, which translates into the educational engagement of minority students.

Introduction

Societies around the world are culturally diverse, which is often perceived in both positive and negative terms (Banks & Banks, 2010, pp. 7–15; Morrison et al., 2010, pp. 1649–1659). Although societies in Western Europe have long been multicultural, bias, xenophobia, racism, and, more broadly, negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities continue to persist (Kende et al., 2017, pp. 15–24).

The body of research on multicultural competence has grown rapidly, especially since the year 2000 (Hammer et al., 2003, pp. 423–441; Olson & Kroeger, 2001, pp. 116–134; Penbek et al., 2012, pp. 233–239; Rissanen et al., 2016, pp. 448–454). This research can be grouped into three main categories. The first group includes studies that assess the level of intercultural knowledge among teachers and pupils (Caingcoy et al., 2022, pp. 21–35; Chen & Starosta, 2000, pp. 1–15; Olson & Kroeger, 2001, pp. 116–137). The second group focuses on studies that examine the level of intercultural competence in both groups (Anderson et al., 2006, pp. 457–469; Penbek et al., 2012, pp. 233–252; Rissanen et al., 2016, pp. 448–450). The third group comprises research exploring teacher and pupil attitudes toward the competencies that teachers need to support in intercultural education (Cushner & Brennan, 2007, pp. 201–213; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009, pp. 440–444).

In order for multiculturalism to take a safe and constructive form, visions, plans, and curricula are not enough. An essential role is played

by teachers and their attitudes toward multiculturalism. In educational contexts, this is referred to as multicultural attitudes, which are considered fundamental to high-quality teaching practices at all levels of education (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 736–752). According to scholars, a multicultural attitude is key to including pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom and school community, while also respecting their cultural differences (Peček & Lesar, 2006, pp. 170–185; Peček & Lesar, 2009, pp. 204–234; Vezzali et al., 2012, pp. 203–212; Vezzali et al., 2012a, pp. 437–440).

Teachers with positive multicultural attitudes help their pupils maintain strong connections with their own cultures and in enhancing their self-awareness, self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and building of their (ethnic) identity (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010, pp. 93–127). These are essential prerequisites for experiencing comfort and joy in the presence of human diversity, encouraging open-mindedness toward others, and for forming strong, caring relationships (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010, pp. 108–134).

It is, without a doubt, the teacher's responsibility to create a school environment in which students can develop positive attitudes toward diversity. However, this is only possible when teachers themselves possess and cultivate positive multicultural attitudes (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 736–752). In the literature, such attitudes are defined as multicultural awareness and sensitivity, or more specifically, as "awareness of, comfort with, and sensitivity to the issues of cultural pluralism in class" (Ponterotto et al., 1998, p. 1003).

It is well known that teachers can transmit their own prejudices to their pupils, which significantly influences the success of inclusion and the academic achievement of minority students (Mlinar & Krammer, 2021, pp. 107–118). Furthermore, teachers' attitudes toward children who do not belong to the majority population affect how they respond to these pupils and to their specific educational needs (Peček et al., 2012, pp. 332–336). Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the attitudes and beliefs about multiculturalism held by early childhood education teachers in Poland and Iceland.

Literature review

Contemporary humanities and social sciences increasingly use the concepts of transculturality, interculturality, and multiculturalism. While often treated as synonymous, these terms describe different types of relationships between cultures coexisting in a given social reality (Byram, 2021, pp. 35–37; Epstein, 2009, pp. 327–352; Lyttle & Barker, 2011, pp. 686–694; Marotta, 2014, pp. 90–102; Sowa-Behtane, 2016). These concepts not only consider the nature and quality of cultural phenomena, but also define cross-cultural relationships as well as models of identity and personality (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015, pp. 16–18; Nikitorowicz & Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, pp. 28–32).

Transculturality is a concept used in the humanities and social sciences to refer – also based on its etymology – to a spatial process of “extending through” the boundary/boundaries of individual cultures. It involves cross-cultural permeation, leading to the emergence of new cultural structures and formations, which are created through heterogeneous networks that include both components shared with other transcultural networks and unique components (Nikitorowicz & Guziuk-Tkacz, 2021, p. 27). The concept also describes:

- the ongoing process of crossing cultural boundaries and generating new cultural qualities with hybrid structures (Falski, 2014, pp. 11–24; Lee & Dovchin, 2019),
- the blending, hybridization, and permeation of contemporary cultures, values, and lifestyles – none of which are entirely homogeneous or easily categorized,
- dynamic interactions between two or more independent cultural poles in both micro- and macro-social contexts (Antor, 2010, pp. 193–214; Pratt, 2007, pp. 129–148), and
- the formation of cultural identities in transnational spaces, where participation “is not a direct effect of the physical presence” (Hastrup, 2008, p. 51).

Interculturality refers to a continuously evolving space “in-between cultures” encompassing elements from two or more cultural contexts. Interactions occurring in this space promote effective coexistence and communication between people from different cultures through dialogue and the exchange of norms, beliefs, and values. This process enriches the lives and cultures of those involved in the interaction (Guziuk-Tkacz & Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2015, pp. 26–76; Holliday, 2011, pp. 98–109; Johansson, 2022, pp. 75–89; Karacabey et al., 2019, pp. 383–393; Piller, 2017; Zhu, 2018, pp. 57–77). The significance of the “in-between” concept lies in raising awareness of one’s own culture by way of comparison, collaboration, and deeper insight into cultural models (Risager & Dervin, 2014, pp. 1–25).

Multiculturalism is most often understood as the distinct recognition of multiple cultures. The phenomenon of multiculturalism, typical of the twenty-first century, stems from ongoing globalization, which encompasses economic, political, social, cultural, environmental, and demographic processes and phenomena. The vast majority of contemporary societies experience multiculturalism, although its intensity and nature vary (Morris et al., 2015, pp. 631–659; Nieto & Bode, 2008, pp. 237–303; Ozdemir & Dil, 2013, pp. 215–232; Rattansi, 2011, pp. 6–28; Sowa-Behtane, 2016, pp. 45–76).

Method

This was an exploratory study (Babbie, 2004, p. 111), and its main objective was to assess the multicultural attitudes of teachers working in early school education in Poland and Iceland, and to examine their beliefs about multiculturalism. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What level of multicultural attitudes and beliefs is demonstrated by teachers working in early school education in Poland and Iceland?
2. Does the socio-cultural environment differentiate attitudes toward multiculturalism held by teachers working in early school education?

3. Is there a relationship between the age of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?
4. Is there a relationship between the number of years of teaching experience of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?
5. Is there a relationship between the command of English of the responding early school teachers and their level of multicultural attitudes? If so, what is it?

The following hypotheses were proposed for Questions 2, 3, 4, and 5:

- H1 (Q2): The socio-cultural environment differentiates the attitudes toward multiculturalism held by teachers working in early school education.
- H2 (Q3): There is a relationship between the age of the responding teachers and their openness to cultural diversity.
- H3 (Q4): There is a relationship between the number of years of teaching experience of the responding teachers and openness to cultural diversity.
- H4 (Q5): There is a relationship between the command of English of the responding teachers and their openness to cultural diversity.

This was a quantitative study using the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE), developed by Munroe and Pearson (2006, pp. 819–834). The MASQUE is an 18-item scale designed to measure multicultural attitudes, divided into three subscales (or dimensions): (1) knowledge, (2) care, and (3) action. Respondents rated their answers using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The data obtained from the quantitative study were analyzed statistically using IBM SPSS software. The analysis included the following descriptive statistics: mean, standard deviation, and tests for statistical significance of differences. The study was conducted via an online survey using a Google Form. In Iceland, the MASQUE was administered in its orig-

inal English version; in Poland, it was translated into Polish. In both countries, the authors of the study contacted local Education Superintendent Offices to request permission to distribute the survey link to early school education teachers, asking them to complete it.

A total of 112 teachers responded to the request: 59 from Iceland and 53 from Poland. Of these, 92% were employed in urban schools, and 96.4% reported teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The ages of the respondents ranged from 20 to over 61 years, and their teaching experience ranged from 0 to over 21 years. Nearly all teachers in Iceland reported proficiency in English, while 66% of the teachers in Poland stated they had a command of English. Respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study group

Categories		Poland		Iceland	
	range	frequency	%	frequency	%
Age	20–30 years	2	3.8	4	6.8
	31–40 years	8	15.1	6	10.2
	41–50 years	16	30.2	23	39.0
	51–60 years	22	41.5	17	28.8
	61 years and more	5	9.4	9	15.3
Years of Experience	0–5 years	5	9.4	14	23.7
	6–10 years	4	7.5	10	16.9
	11–20 years	11	20.8	14	23.7
	21 years and more	33	62.3	21	35.6
Command of English	no	18	34	1	1.7
	yes	35	66	58	98.3

The research project was carried out between September 2023 and February 2024. To ensure compliance with research ethics, the survey was conducted anonymously. Moreover, no data were collected that could allow for the identification of individual respondents.

Data analysis

(1) Attitudes toward multiculturalism among early school education teachers in Poland and Iceland

At the first stage of the analysis, the authors examined multicultural attitudes in the study group. To this end, a frequency analysis of the overall attitude score was performed, based on the standards outlined in the original publication. The analysis was conducted separately for the subgroups of Polish teachers and Icelandic teachers (Table 2).

**Table 2. Score distribution for the overall indicator
of multicultural attitudes among teachers in Poland and Iceland**

	Frequency	Percentage	Level
Poland	4	7.5%	Low
	20	37.7%	Average
	29	54.7%	High
Iceland	0	0.0%	Low
	11	18.6%	Average
	48	81.4%	High

The analysis showed that among Polish early school education teachers, the highest percentage of respondents (54.7%) scored high on the overall indicator of multicultural attitudes. An average score was reported by 37.7% of respondents, while a low score was reported by 7.5%. In contrast, among teachers from Iceland, as many as 81.4% scored high, and 18.6% reported an average score. No respondents in this group scored low.

(2) Attitudes of early school education teachers toward multiculturalism vs. the socio-cultural environment

In the first step of the analysis, the distribution of quantitative variables was examined. Descriptive statistics were calculated using the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. The distribution analysis showed that most

variables did not significantly deviate from a normal distribution – in these cases, the Shapiro–Wilk test was statistically significant. Due to this, and the presence of outliers (above 3 standard deviations), it was appropriate to use non-parametric tests.

In the next step, the analysis assessed whether Polish teachers differed from teachers in Iceland in terms of their multicultural attitudes, specifically in the areas of knowledge, care/empathy, action, and the overall indicator of attitudes (H1). To this end, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted (Table 3, Diagram 1).

**Table 3. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test
comparing the level of multicultural attitudes by country**

Dependent variable	Poland (n = 53)			Iceland (n = 59)			Z.	p	r
	mean rank	Mdn	IQR	mean rank	Mdn	IQR			
Knowledge	42.71	33.00	13.00	68.89	40.00	7.00	-4.30	<0.001	0.41
Care/empathy	56.65	26.00	9.00	56.36	26.00	9.00	-0.05	0.963	<0.01
Action	45.93	21.00	6.00	65.99	25.00	6.00	-3.27	0.001	0.31
Attitudes – overall score	46.16	79.00	19.00	65.79	91.00	17.00	-3.20	0.001	0.30

Notes: n = number of observations; Mdn = median; IQR = interquartile range; Z = test statistic;
p = statistical significance; r = effect size.

Verification of Hypothesis H1: The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the groups in two subscales, i.e., knowledge and action, as well as in the overall attitude score. Teachers from Iceland demonstrated higher levels of multicultural attitudes in the areas of knowledge, action, and overall attitude score compared to teachers from Poland. The values of the effect size (r coefficients) indicate that the differences were moderately strong. Hypothesis H1 was partially supported.

(3) Attitudes of early school education teachers toward multiculturalism vs. age and years of teaching experience

In this part of the analysis, we examined the relationship between multicultural attitude levels and age (verification of H2), as well as years of teaching experience (verification of H3). To this end, Spearman’s rho correlation was calculated, with separate analyses for the subgroups of teachers from Poland and Iceland (Table 4).

Table 4. Spearman’s rho correlation between the level of multicultural attitudes and age and years of teaching experience in study subgroups

	Variable		Age	Teaching experience
Poland	Knowledge	Spearman’s rho	-0.14	-0.22
		significance	0.306	0.110
	Care/empathy	Spearman’s rho	-0.25	-0.40
		significance	0.074	0.003
	Act	Spearman’s rho	0.05	0.06
		significance	0.727	0.676
	Attitudes – overall score	Spearman’s rho	-0.15	-0.25
		significance	0.270	0.071
Iceland	Knowledge	Spearman’s rho	-0.31	-0.34
		significance	0.016	0.008
	Care/empathy	Spearman’s rho	-0.21	-0.15
		significance	0.115	0.258
	Action	Spearman’s rho	-0.26	-0.13
		significance	0.049	0.333
	Attitudes – overall score	Spearman’s rho	-0.32	-0.29
		significance	0.013	0.028

Verification of Hypotheses H2 and H3: In the subgroup of teachers from Poland, the analysis revealed one statistically significant and moderately strong correlation: between years of teaching experience and the

care/empathy dimension. The correlation was negative, which indicates that care/empathy scores decreased as years of teaching experience increased.

In the group of teachers from Iceland, statistically significant relationships were found between age and years of teaching experience and the knowledge and overall attitude scores, as well as between age and action. These correlations were also negative, which means that as age and years of experience increased, the levels of the listed dimensions of multicultural attitudes decreased. Most of these relationships were either moderately strong or weak.

This means that Hypotheses H2 and H3 were partially supported. The remaining relationships were statistically insignificant.

(4) Multicultural attitudes vs. command of English

In the next stage of the analysis, the authors examined whether command of English influenced scores in the areas of multicultural attitude, namely, knowledge, care/empathy, action, and the overall attitude score (verification of H4).¹ To do this, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test comparing the level of multicultural attitudes by command of English (teachers from Poland)

Dependent variable	No (n = 18)			Yes (n = 35)			Z.	p	r
	average rank	Mdn	IQR	average rank	Mdn	IQR			
Knowledge	22.94	30.50	11.50	29.09	33.00	14.00	-1.37	0.169	0.19
Care/empathy	21.50	23.00	8.50	29.83	28.00	9.00	-1.86	0.063	0.26
Action	26.53	21.00	6.00	27.24	21.00	6.00	-0.16	0.872	0.02
Attitudes – overall score	22.92	77.00	20.00	29.10	80.00	22.00	-1.38	0.167	0.19

Notes: n – number of observations; Mdn – median; IQR – interquartile range; Z – test statistic;
p – significance level; r – effect size.

¹ This test was conducted only with the subgroup of Polish teachers, as the number of participants in the Icelandic group without English language skills was too small to perform the test (n = 1).

Verification of Hypothesis H4: The analysis showed no statistically significant differences between the groups. This indicates that the level of multicultural attitudes was similar, irrespective of the respondents' command of English. Hypothesis H4 was rejected.

Discussion

Teachers are role models who influence all types of behaviors, actions, and attitudes (Rubie-Davies et al., 2014, pp. 181–191; Johnson et al., 2016, pp. 128–136), which is particularly important during the early years of children's education. Recent global migration has brought major changes to the educational experiences of pupils, parents, and teachers. This study centres on teachers working in schools in Poland and Iceland attended by culturally diverse student populations, aiming to examine their attitudes and views on multiculturalism.

Regarding the research question about openness to cultural diversity among respondents, a high overall score was observed in 81.4% of teachers from Iceland, while only 54.7% of teachers from Poland scored similarly high. An average score was reported by 37.7% of respondents from Poland and 18.6% from Iceland. It should be stressed that none of the Icelandic teachers scored low on the multicultural attitudes scale, whereas 7.5% of Polish teachers did.

The study found that the socio-cultural environment influences respondents' multicultural attitudes. This difference was mainly attributed to higher scores in the knowledge and action dimensions. A teacher's knowledge consists of both personal experience and expertise acquired during academic training (Banks & Banks, 2010, pp. 104–130). The findings correspond with research conducted in Poland by Barkowiak (2021, pp. 267–286). They also reference the study by Thomassen & Munthe (2021, pp. 234–248), which emphasized the importance of ongoing teacher training in multicultural education.

The data also suggest that openness to cultural diversity among Polish respondents depends on their command of English. Among the responding teachers from Iceland, it was found that as both age and years

of teaching experience increased, their knowledge about multiculturalism and their overall multicultural attitude decreased. Educators with more years of experience may be less inclined to update or expand their knowledge in this area. Such teachers are often convinced that it is the pupils who must adapt to the learning environment, and that educators themselves should not be expected to receive specialized training.

Among the responding teachers from Poland, the negative relationship between years of teaching experience and the care subscale may indicate symptoms of occupational burnout. The results support conclusions from the study by Perkowska-Klejman (2011, pp. 1–10), which found that the longer teachers work at a school, the less helpful, friendly, and easy-going they tend to be. More positive and supportive relationships with pupils are often built by teachers with relatively fewer years of experience. This may be due to a generation gap, as well as personality traits more commonly associated with young age, such as enthusiasm, optimism, cheerfulness, and creativity.

Conclusions

Contemporary education is constantly undergoing changes influenced by cultural, political, and social factors, which are increasingly shaped by the reality of living and growing up in multicultural contexts. For teachers, it is very important to adopt teaching methods based on acknowledgement and respect for differences and diversity, along with maintaining a positive attitude toward multiculturalism in educational settings (Chakir & Peček, 2014, pp. 19–36).

This is particularly important given that teachers with a higher level of multicultural attitudes are significantly more engaged in teaching that is sensitive to culture and intercultural education, which in turn enhances the engagement of minority students, their interest in schooling, and their academic achievement (Abacioglu et al., 2020, pp. 748–749).

In a multicultural world, it is vital to develop a new theory of acculturation that is relevant to educational practice. There is a need to shape open-ended identities – for both teachers and students – where key

elements include openness to dialogue and a disposition toward learning about others, understanding their perspectives, and appreciating their worlds and motivations (Szempruch, 2022, pp. 120–128).

The collected research data clearly indicate the need to strengthen multicultural education in the Polish education system. It is crucial to implement systemic solutions that support the development of multicultural attitudes among teachers. The most important actions include:

- (a) Mandatory training on cultural diversity – enabling teachers to deepen their understanding of the cultures, customs, and needs of students from diverse backgrounds;
- (b) Incorporation of intercultural content into teacher education programs – to ensure that future teachers are better prepared to work in diverse school environments;
- (c) Provision of institutional support for working with children who have migration experience – including, among other things, access to specialist assistance, educational materials, and platforms for the exchange of best practices.

Implementing these measures can contribute to the creation of a more open, inclusive, and effective educational environment in Polish schools, which is necessary in today's increasingly diverse society.

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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

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
	neutra	112	13.51		
	lpositive	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:

- 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).

- b) In terms of the belief that teachers should take a Ukrainian language course [$F(2,826) = 6.30, \eta^2 = .02, p = .002$], the highest average was recorded among teachers of grades 1–3, and the lowest among teachers of grades 4–8 in primary schools.
- c) Difficulties faced by Ukrainian students in learning other subjects [$F(2,826) = 3.59, \eta^2 = .01, p = .028$] were most frequently identified by teachers of students in grades 4–8.
- d) Difficulties related to how students spend free time at school [$F(2,826) = 3.59, \eta^2 = .01, p = .028$] were most often reported by secondary school teachers, and least often by teachers working with grades 1–3.
- e) Difficulties completing individual tasks during lessons [$F(2,826) = 3.49, \eta^2 = .01, p = .031$] and homework assignments [$F(2,826) = 3.96, \eta^2 = .01, p = .019$] were more frequently reported by teachers of the youngest students, and in the case of homework, also by teachers of grades 4–8.
- f) The importance of psychological support [$F(2,826) = 3.29, \eta^2 = .01, p = .008$], a sense of peace and order [$F(2,826) = 4.59, \eta^2 = .01, p = .010$], and safety [$F(2,826) = 4.96, \eta^2 = .01, p = .007$] for the optimal education of Ukrainian students was most frequently emphasized by teachers of grades 1–3 and least often by secondary school teachers.
- g) Conditions identified as beneficial – such as transparent rules and daily schedules [$F(2,826) = 5.86, \eta^2 = .01, p = .003$], smaller class sizes [$F(2,826) = 6.60, \eta^2 = .02, p = .001$], positive peer attitudes [$F(2,826) = 5.86, \eta^2 = .01, p = .003$], supportive teachers [$F(2,826) = 4.94, \eta^2 = .01, p = .007$], creating conditions for promoting student independence [$F(2,826) = 7.09, \eta^2 = .02, p = .001$], providing additional time for processing and responding [$F(2,826) = 3.64, \eta^2 = .01, p = .027$], understanding students' mental state [$F(2,826) = 3.59, \eta^2 = .01, p = .028$], considering Ukrainian culture and customs [$F(2,826) = 5.02, \eta^2 = .01, p = .007$], and breaking teaching content into smaller segments [$F(2,826) = 3.36, \eta^2 = .01, p = .035$] – were most frequently mentioned by teachers of grades 1–3 and least often by secondary school teachers.

Discussion

Currently, 46% of school-age refugee children and teenagers participate in the Polish education system (Poland's education response..., 2024). These students can attend Polish schools and learn in Polish, but they also have the option to learn online through the Ukrainian education system (Pacek, 2022). The teachers who responded to our survey were of the opinion that the education of students from Ukraine should mainly take place in schools – first in preparatory classes and then in regular classes with Polish students. While acknowledging the difficulties that Ukrainian students may face in learning Polish, the respondents favored in-person instruction in Polish or online learning within the Ukrainian system. Similar opinions have been reported by other researchers (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

A German study on separate classes for newcomer students from different countries shows that this system can have both inclusive and exclusionary effects, which suggests that it is neither a simple nor universally correct solution (Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018). Another study, focusing on refugee students from Ukraine in Austria, found that separate classes tend to be exclusionary and recommends placing newcomer students in mainstream classrooms as the best solution (Woltran et al., 2023). In Sweden, research indicates that some parents maintain a dual system of learning for their children (attending in-person classes in the host country while participating in remote learning in Ukraine) as part of an effort to preserve social status in both contexts (Pridgorna, 2023). Lokshyna et al. (2022) similarly note that this approach helps students build relationships in the host country while maintaining ties to their country of origin.

The results of our study indicate that teacher preparation (in the teachers' own view) should include training in how to support students experiencing crisis or trauma. This was especially emphasized for younger grade levels, where psychological support, along with a sense of peace, order, and safety, was seen as particularly important. These priorities are confirmed by a survey conducted by Budnyk et al. (2023), which identified challenges in educating children affected by the Russian invasion

of Ukraine. In that study, 77.9% of teachers indicated that psycho-emotional trauma always or often created a barrier to learning (10.1% and 58.8%, respectively). As a result, traumatized students were reported to always (16.2%) or often (33.8%) avoid talking about the war, and 73.5% of them missed their school, friends, and teachers who are still in the occupied territories. These findings are supported by Nazaruk et al. (2024), who argue that trained teachers are capable of making preliminary assessments of students' emotional and psychological difficulties.

Other studies on refugee students from different countries attest to the importance of providing psychological support (Salami et al., 2021; Guruge & Butt, 2015; Nazish et al., 2021; Mares, 2020; Nazaruk et al., 2024). Furthermore, meta-analyses of research on students' proficiency in both their native and host languages confirm that language skills are a crucial factor in academic success (Prevoo et al., 2016). Among the teachers surveyed, the least interest was shown in receiving training in intercultural education or in learning Ukrainian. However, primary school teachers working with younger students were more likely to acknowledge the need to learn Ukrainian. Markowska-Manista (2016) emphasizes that few teachers possess strong intercultural knowledge or communication skills in a foreign language. Similarly, a study by Prentice (2023) shows that teachers of immigrant children often view their students as valuable sources of cultural knowledge and see this as beneficial to the educational process.

Our study revealed an encouraging finding: refugee students experience the fewest difficulties in their relationships with teachers and in how they spend their free time at school. Younger students tended to feel more at ease, while secondary school students reported more challenges in this area. At the same time, teachers noted that successful education for refugee students is supported by strong personal relationships with both peers and teachers. In a study conducted by S. McDiarmid's team (2022), teachers, being aware of the personal hardships that these students had endured, reported paying more attention to, showing greater empathy toward, and being more lenient with refugee children. Similarly, E. Antoniadou et al. (2022) found that teachers they surveyed emphasized

the importance of empathy and the absence of bias when working with refugee students.

The key difficulties identified by surveyed teachers were learning Polish and mastering other subjects included in the curriculum for a given stage of education. These problems were more pronounced for students at higher educational stages. For younger children, completing individual tasks proved to be a greater challenge. Teachers believed that the presence of an assistant teacher could help solve this problem. Other studies suggest that in order to make Ukrainian children feel more comfortable in the classroom, teachers should respect their established learning routines and pace instead of imposing rules designed for Polish students. The importance of proper diagnosis of educational needs is also highlighted by other scholars (Prentice & Ott, 2021; Cooc & Kim, 2023; Parmigiani et al., 2023).

Additional studies (McDiarmid, Durbeej et al., 2022) have identified other sources of difficulty, such as the varied and highly changeable needs of students, the emotional toll of providing psychological support, and language barriers (Parmigiani et al., 2023). Herzog-Punzenberger et al. (2020) confirm that teachers in several European countries (including Austria, Ireland, Norway, and Turkey) take steps to adapt assessment systems for refugee students, even in the absence of official guidance or in defiance of government recommendations. A study conducted in Turkey similarly shows that teachers make accommodations such as slowing the pace of instruction, offering additional explanations, and awarding extra points on assessments (Asmali, 2017).

With respect to the external teaching and learning environment, teachers identified overcrowded classrooms and excessive noise as major obstacles. Conversely, they believed that learning could be enhanced by clear rules and daily schedules, creating conditions that are conducive to learners' independence, allowing more time to process information and respond, helping refugee learners understand their emotional states, acknowledging Ukrainian culture and customs, and dividing instructional content into smaller, more manageable parts. These optimal educational strategies were least often cited by secondary school teachers. Other

studies also emphasize the need to adapt school environments to refugee students' needs, including establishing clear daily routines and reducing class sizes (Blatchford et al., 2003).

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on teachers working with students from Ukraine and does not include the perspectives of other stakeholders in the education system, such as refugee students themselves, their parents, or school administrators. As a result, it presents only a partial view of the educational reality. It would be worthwhile to explore the opinions of other individuals involved in the education of Ukrainian students who have experienced forced migration.

Another limitation is that the study spans a time period up to January 2023 and does not take into account the opinions and experiences of teachers acquired afterward. In addition, the views discussed in this article reflect the subjective perceptions of the surveyed teachers. The study was designed within a positivist paradigm and used a survey method, which provides quantitative data that often enables a general understanding of the process or phenomenon in question.

Conclusions

This study underscores the need for a systemic and multidimensional approach to supporting refugee students, particularly in the context of the recent influx of children and adolescents from Ukraine into European school systems. In order to address the complex educational and psychosocial needs of these students, it is essential to enhance both teacher preparedness and the institutional capacity of schools:

1. Revise educational programs to include content focused on developing intercultural competence and trauma-sensitive pedagogical skills.
2. Develop procedures and tools to address the emotional and language-related challenges faced by refugee students.
3. Create publicly accessible training platforms for teachers and professionals working in culturally diverse classrooms.

4. Develop bilingual teaching materials, language support applications, and other tailored educational resources to ensure accessibility and meaningful participation in the learning process.

Addressing the needs of both educators and learners is not only essential for improving educational quality but also represents a fundamental step toward equity and social cohesion in culturally diverse societies.

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Multiculturalism, prejudice, and teachers' expectations for the acculturation strategies of the refugee students

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): Ongoing migration flows in Greece continue to increase the cultural diversity of the student population and heighten the need to include refugee students in the educational system. The aim of this study is to assess teachers' attitudes toward intercultural relations in the school context, focusing on their views on multiculturalism, their prejudices toward refugees, and their expectations regarding the acculturation of refugee students.

Research methods: This study employs a quantitative methodology and a synchronic research design. A total of 155 teachers participated by completing a questionnaire composed of the Multicultural Ideology Scale (Berry, 2017), a Prejudice Scale, and the Acculturation Expectations Scale (Berry, 2017). Data analysis was carried out on three levels: first, descriptive statistics were applied to outline response distribution and key sample characteristics; second, correlations between variables were examined; and finally, regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of independent variables on dependent ones, allowing for interpretation of potential causal relationships.

Process of argumentation: Teachers, as members of the majority group, exert considerable influence in shaping the school environment. Based on this premise, the study investigates teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism, their prejudices toward refugees, and their expectations regarding the acculturation strategies that refugee students should adopt. Promoting multiculturalism within schools can contribute to intercultural interaction and support the development

of equal relationships. Furthermore, greater understanding of acculturation strategies can improve the management of educational challenges related to refugee populations, thus encouraging an inclusive educational environment.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study found that teachers in Greece generally acknowledge and accept cultural diversity and exhibit low levels of prejudice toward refugees. They tend to favor integration and assimilation strategies over separation. Multiculturalism was shown to support integration and assimilation, while prejudice was associated with a preference for separation. Regression analysis confirmed that multicultural attitudes reduce prejudice and promote integration, whereas prejudice increases support for separation. Embracing multiculturalism in the school context facilitates intercultural contact and strengthens relationships between students and teachers. Understanding acculturation expectations is critical, as it directly influences the educational and psychological adjustment of refugee students. Teachers who support integration can help prevent conflict in multicultural classrooms.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Acculturation is a dynamic process shaped by two interacting conditions. This study examines teachers' expectations regarding the acculturation strategies of refugee students. However, it remains unclear to what extent refugees are able to voluntarily choose or consent to a particular strategy, as their freedom to do so is often limited. Refugee students may shift between strategies in response to their evolving needs and external demands. Importantly, integration or assimilation should not be viewed as the only culturally legitimate options.

Introduction

In Europe (specifically in the countries of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain), migration flows between 2016 and the beginning of November 2020 amounted to 927,715 refugees, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In Greece alone, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Asylum Department, the number of refugees entering the mainland during 2014–2015 is estimated at 904,948 (861,630 refugees in 2015 and 43,318 refugees in 2014). For the subsequent years (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020) up to November 2, 2020, the International Organization for Migration estimates that 346,012 refugees entered Greece, either by sea or by land. These

refugees primarily came from Afghanistan (38%), Syria (24%), Congo (11%), Iraq (about 4%), and Palestine (3.7%).

During the data collection period of this survey (January to February 2021), migration flows had decreased by up to 92% compared to January 2020 (292 arrivals vs. 3,713 arrivals). Accommodation facilities are being shut down as the asylum process accelerates. The Ministry of Migration and Asylum is proceeding with returns and relocations (according to a publication from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum: <https://migration.gov.gr/enimerotiko-ianouariou-2021/>). All these continuous migratory flows in Greece have increased both the diversity of the student population and the need to include refugee students in the educational process. The coexistence of individuals from diverse cultural and ethno-cultural backgrounds in schools requires maintaining a balance between academic performance and social adaptation. This balance will help avoid the development of crises that could later be transferred and manifest more broadly in society. Given their role as members of the majority group, teachers have a significant influence in this context. Based on this assumption, issues arise concerning teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism, their prejudices toward refugees, and their expectations regarding the acculturation strategies followed by refugee students.

The idea of multiculturalism encompasses the acceptance of cultural diversity (Berry & Kalin, 1995) and promotes the inclusion of members of immigrant groups (Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2013). In other words, multiculturalism refers to a relational framework oriented toward the cultural heterogeneity of society members who interact with individuals from other cultures (Berry, 2017; Schalk-Soekar & Van de Vijver, 2008). These individuals are motivated to form groups in which the distinctive features of their cultural heritage are preserved, rather than absorbed into the melting pot of the majority group (Batkina et al., 2021; Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2013). The key characteristics of multiculturalism include the preservation of cultural diversity, intergroup contact, and the willingness to engage in mutual change (Berry, 2017; Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2013).

According to Kessler et al. (2010), prejudice in itself shapes emotional reactions, as prejudiced attitudes often develop before individuals have

had any actual contact with out-group members. Hartley and Pedersen (2015) highlight the value and role of emotions as predictors of intergroup behavior and attitudes. They also emphasize the importance of measuring emotions, as these provide a wide range of insights into how out-groups are perceived. This range helps to understand the majority's reactions toward the out-group in a given situation. According to Intergroup Emotion Theory (Smith, 1993), the emotional response triggered by intergroup evaluations causes tendencies for specific intergroup behaviors. The more distinct the emotions experienced by group members, the more distinct their attitudes and/or behavioral intentions (Mackie et al., 2008).

Acculturation is the process of direct cross-cultural contact and the adaptation of an individual to a new culture (Pavlopoulos, 2018). During this process, all parties involved adopt specific strategies for cross-cultural interaction (Berry, 1997). According to John Berry's model (1997, 2011), the preferences expressed by members of the majority group regarding the desired acculturation strategies of minority group members are termed "acculturation expectations." These expectations include four preferences commonly held by majority members: the "melting pot" or "pressure cooker," which refers to a preference for the assimilation strategy (no to cultural identity maintenance, yes to interaction); separation, which indicates a preference for the separation strategy (yes to cultural identity maintenance, no to interaction); exclusion, which represents a preference for the marginalization strategy (no to cultural identity maintenance, no to interaction); and multiculturalism, which reflects a preference for the integration strategy (yes to cultural identity maintenance, yes to interaction). The latter reflects the view of cultural diversity as a dominant characteristic of society (Berry, 1997, 2011).

Previous findings

In research by Lopez and Vazquez (2006) and Beremenyi (2011), teachers' prejudices toward specific minority groups appeared to affect the academic success and adjustment of minority group students. In Zembylas'

(2010) study, Cypriot teachers were reportedly disturbed by the presence of Turkish Cypriot students in the classroom due to historical reasons. Zembylas (2010) concluded that Cypriot teachers were unable to manage student population diversity and multiculturalism effectively.

According to Makarova and Herzog's (2013) survey, most teachers – around 55% – expected culturally diverse students to adopt the separation strategy, while 36% believed that the desired acculturation strategy was integration. In Eisikovits' (2008) study, two teacher profiles were identified: those who reported an inability to manage or change their assimilationist attitudes in their usual educational practices, and those who struggled to work with culturally diverse students and displayed a degree of marginalization. According to Makarova and Birman (2016), students from other cultural backgrounds face a monocultural school system, teachers' tendencies, and pressure toward assimilation and overall homogenization. This conclusion is also supported by Tabatadze and Gorgadze's (2017) research, in which teachers perceived the cultural diversity of their student population as a problem and therefore used assimilationist approaches to manage their multicultural classrooms.

In Greece, a study by Motti-Stefanidi et al. (2008) found that teachers rated more highly the performance and adjustment of immigrant students who reported stronger engagement with Greek culture. In contrast, maintaining ethnic culture did not appear to positively influence teachers' ratings. This suggests that teachers tend to prefer students who assimilate into the host culture, which reflects an assimilationist ideology (melting pot). The authors point out that this may be because the Greek educational system, like others, operates on the basis of assimilationist models, promoting engagement with the host culture rather than the preservation of cultural diversity. This finding reinforces the importance of multicultural awareness and the need to strengthen integration policies that recognize and respect the multiple cultural identities of migrant students. The authors highlight the need for further research on teachers' acculturation expectations in relation to their immigrant students. Understanding these expectations is critical, as they can influence both teachers' attitudes toward students and the educational

and psychological adjustment of migrant students in the school environment.

A study by Sapountzis (2013) highlights the coexistence of both positive and negative attitudes toward immigrants and their acculturation. On the one hand, positive views are expressed regarding immigrants' contributions to society and the importance of integrating them through education. However, these views are often accompanied by suggestions to restrict their rights or to implement separation strategies – such as the proposal to create separate schools for migrant children in order to avoid “lowering” the overall standard of education. This contradiction reflects deeper social and ideological tensions. The acceptance of immigrants as members of society coexists with the fear that their presence may threaten cultural and social cohesion. Thus, while integration and assimilation may be advocated in principle, in practice strategies that reinforce separation and exclusion are often adopted.

In Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi's (2017) survey, integration emerges as the main acculturation strategy for Greeks, with 35.6% of participants preferring it and assigning it the highest mean score ($M = 3.94$), which indicates high overall acceptance. Marginalization is the next most common strategy, with 27.6% of respondents selecting it as their primary approach, although it has only a moderate mean level of acceptability ($M = 2.30$). Separation is chosen as the main strategy by just 15.4% of participants, but it has a slightly higher mean ($M = 2.41$), suggesting that although it is not frequently selected, it is not entirely rejected either. Finally, assimilation is selected by 21.4% of respondents but receives the lowest mean score ($M = 1.97$), which indicates that it is not generally well accepted, even among those who prefer it as a dominant strategy.

In Figgou and Baka's (2018) research, an interesting contradiction emerges in teachers' discourse: on the one hand, teachers reject assimilation as an acculturation strategy, viewing it as problematic when students are overly eager to abandon their mother tongue and identification with their country of origin. On the other hand, they believe that similarity to Greek students – in terms of language, habits, and general behavior – is necessary to achieve harmonious interpersonal relationships

in the school environment. As a result, students with an immigrant background are asked to balance between two opposing demands: a) to maintain their own cultural identity, and b) to resemble their Greek classmates in order to integrate smoothly into the school setting.

The findings of Fili and Pavlopoulos' (2024) research indicate that the Greek educational system remains largely monocultural, which poses challenges to the successful integration of refugee children. Teachers report deficiencies in training, facilities, and appropriate teaching resources, while students' acculturation is affected by factors such as language barriers, acceptance by the local community, and their families' living conditions. The pandemic has further contributed to these integration challenges, with distance learning proving particularly inadequate for refugee populations due to the lack of technological resources and internet access. Teachers emphasize the importance of better intercultural education, increased psychosocial support for students, and closer collaboration with families. Despite the obstacles, it is noted that a supportive and welcoming school environment can greatly facilitate the successful integration of refugee students.

All this evidence, combined with the widely held belief that school is a microcosm of society, highlights the importance of examining the present field and the primary context in which the process of acculturation occurs and "unfolds" (Makarova, 't Gilde, & Birman, 2019). Accordingly, this paper aims to assess teachers' attitudes and views on intercultural relations in the school setting, with a focus on their views on multiculturalism, their prejudices toward refugees, and their acculturation expectations. The research questions explored in this paper are as follows:

- What are teachers' views on multiculturalism?
- What are teachers' prejudices toward refugees?
- What are teachers' acculturation expectations for refugee students?
- What are the relationships between multiculturalism, prejudice, and teachers' acculturation expectations?
- How do multiculturalism and teachers' prejudices toward refugees predict acculturation expectations for refugee students?

Method

Participants

The target population from which the sample was drawn consisted of teachers working in primary schools (where 70% of refugee students are enrolled, compared to approximately 30% in secondary education, according to UNHCR, 2019 mixed indicators). The sampling method used was non-probability sampling, specifically snowball sampling. Data collection took place between January 18 and February 12, 2021. The quantitative data were compiled in an Excel file and then processed and analyzed using SPSS Statistics 25.

The research instrument was accompanied by an introductory note, in accordance with ethical guidelines, outlining the purpose of the research and ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, to strengthen the validity of the findings. The note also clarified that participation was voluntary, involved no financial compensation, and could be discontinued at any time. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the 155 teachers who participated in the survey. The majority of respondents were female ($n = 137$, 88.4%), and 91.6% ($n = 142$) reported having students from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds.

Procedure and Measures

The Multicultural Ideology Scale

In this study, the concept of multiculturalism was approached from a psychological perspective – as an attitude associated with multicultural ideology – and refers to the recognition of a culturally heterogeneous society (conceptualization). To this end, the Multicultural Ideology Scale was used, as proposed and applied in Berry's MIRIPS project (2017) on intercultural relations between majority and minority groups. The scale primarily measures the dimension of cultural preservation (recognition of different ethnic origins), rather than group equality (operationalization) (Pavlopoulos & Motti-Stefanidi, 2017).

The scale was translated and standardized in Greek – using the back-translation method – by Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi (2017). The only adaptation made was the substitution of the term “migrant” with “refugee.” The Multicultural Ideology Scale consists of 10 declarative statements measuring the degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale. Five of these statements are negatively worded, while the other five are positively worded. During data processing, the negative items were reverse-coded to align conceptually with the positive ones.

The Prejudice Scale

This study employed a five-point Likert scale to measure six emotional responses. Three emotions were positive (admire, trust, like), and three were negative (feel angry, irritated, annoyed) (Dijker, 1987; Kessler et al., 2010; Zagefka et al., 2014). The scale ranged from “not at all” to “very much,” with teacher respondents indicating the intensity of each emotion. To further assess teachers’ behavioral intentions – specifically their willingness for social contact or desire for distance from the target group (i.e., refugees) – two additional statements were included. These measured respondents’ attitudes and intentions toward overt behavior involving members of the refugee group:

“I would like to live next door to refugees.”

“I would feel discomfort if I had to work with a teacher from the refugee group.”

To maintain consistency, items representing positive emotions and intentions were reverse-coded so that the overall scale measured negative emotional responses.

Table 1. Demographic data of teachers (N = 155)

Participant Characteristics		v	%
Gender	Female	137	88.4%
	Male	18	11.6%
Age	23-30 years old	30	19.4%
	31-40 years old	58	37.4%
	41-50 years old	39	25.2%
	51-60 years old	27	17.4%
	61 years and over	1	0.6%
Level of education	Bachelor's degree from a Pedagogical Academy	17	11.0%
	Pedagogical Academy degree with completed degree equivalence program	7	4.5%
	Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy	55	35.5%
	Second (additional) degree	5	3.2%
	Master's degree in Intercultural Education	5	3.2%
	Master's degree in another field	63	40.6%
	Doctoral degree	3	1.9%
Teaching experience	Up to 5 years	39	25.2%
	6 to 10 years	20	12.9%
	11 to 20 years	62	40.0%
	Over 21 years	34	21.9%
Have you had students from different ethno-cultural groups?	No	13	8.4%
	Yes	142	91.6%

The Acculturation Expectations Scale

In this study, the participating teachers clarified their expectations regarding the acculturation strategies that refugee students should adopt. As outlined in Berry's theoretical framework, teachers' expectations comprise two elements: their attitudes and their behaviors (Berry, 2017). In order to measure these expectations, the study used a scale reflecting

majority group expectations for minority group acculturation strategies, as employed in Berry's MIRIPS project (2017). This scale was translated and standardized into Greek – using the back-translation method – by Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi (2017). The only modification was replacing the word “migrant” with “refugee student.” The scale consists of 16 items (grouped into four subscales), rated on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement. Items 1, 4, 8, and 14 assess separation; items 5, 9, 15, and 16 assess integration; items 6, 10, 11, and 12 assess assimilation; items 2, 3, 7, and 13 assess marginalization.

Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α). The Multicultural Ideology scale demonstrated very high reliability ($\alpha = 0.887$). Similarly, the Prejudice scale also showed a very high level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.916$). However, unacceptable reliability values were observed for the dimensions of the Acculturation Expectations scale. Therefore, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. To assess the suitability of the data, Bartlett's test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy were used. According to Fabrigar and Wegener (2011), EFA is appropriate when the KMO value exceeds 0.7 and Bartlett's test is statistically significant ($p < \alpha = 0.05$).

Factor extraction was performed using Oblimin rotation, and the number of factors was determined based on the eigenvalue criterion. Items were assigned to factors using factor loadings; according to Thompson (2004), factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 are retained, and loadings above 0.3 are considered acceptable. The factor analysis revealed three factors for the Acculturation Expectations Scale: Separation (items: 2, 3, 4, 6); Assimilation (items: 7, 10, 12; all reverse-coded); Integration (items: 14, 15, 16; item 14 reverse-coded). The Separation subscale showed an acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.673$). The Assimilation subscale showed good reliability ($\alpha = 0.705$), and the Integration subscale also demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.742$).

Results

Statistics and data analysis

Descriptive analysis results

The analysis revealed that the teachers who participated in the survey exhibited a moderate to high level of multicultural ideology ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.78$, $Mdn = 3.80$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the results showed that the participating teachers demonstrated a low level of prejudice toward refugees ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.78$, $Mdn = 2.13$, $p < 0.05$). Similar findings were reported in the study by Zagefka et al. (2014), where the prejudice scale scores were 2.58 and 2.66 at two separate points of measurement. Therefore, it is expected that the mediating role of these positive emotions may positively influence teachers' preferences for the desired acculturation strategies for refugee students, as these emotions are known to be significant predictors of behavioral tendencies among majority group members (Lopez-Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Regarding teachers' acculturation expectations for refugee students, the findings showed the following mean values: separation ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.73$, $Mdn = 1.75$, $p < 0.05$), assimilation ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.75$, $Mdn = 4.33$, $p < 0.05$), and integration ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.62$, $Mdn = 4.67$, $p < 0.05$). These results suggest that teachers believe that refugee students should, to a large extent, be integrated and assimilated into the host culture and, to a lesser extent, remain separated from it. To determine whether the difference between the mean values of assimilation and integration was statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted, as the two samples are dependent. The results indicated that the difference between assimilation ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.75$) and integration ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.62$) was statistically significant ($t(N-1) = -5.38$, $p < 0.001$), with an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.43$. Although the effect size was small-to-moderate, the results indicate a meaningful preference for integration over assimilation among teachers. However, this statistically significant yet small difference may reflect more complex underlying attitudes, as discussed below.

Variable correlation results

Due to non-normality in most variables and the presence of outliers, the use of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was deemed more appropriate than Pearson's correlation coefficient. The analysis revealed that multicultural ideology was negatively associated with teachers' support for separation and positively associated with their support for both assimilation and integration of refugee students. Likewise, prejudice toward refugees was positively associated with support for separation and negatively associated with support for assimilation and integration. Full correlation results are presented in Table 2.

Regression analysis

This section presents the results of the regression analysis examining whether multicultural ideology significantly predicts teachers' prejudice toward refugees and their expectations regarding acculturation strategies for refugee students. First, key regression assumptions such as linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity – were tested. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the residuals, and the results indicated that the data did not follow a normal distribution. However, this is less critical with a large sample size (>30 observations), in accordance with the Central Limit Theorem. Given the sample size of 155 participants, the deviation from normality is not considered a serious issue for linear regression, as the model remains stable. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 2.10, which is close to the ideal value of 2, indicating no problems with autocorrelation of residuals.

The analysis showed a violation of the assumption of homoscedasticity, as the Breusch-Pagan test yielded $p < 0.05$, indicating heteroscedasticity – i.e., the residuals do not have constant variance. This may affect the accuracy of estimates and statistical inferences. To address this issue, robust standard errors were applied. The results showed that teachers' multicultural ideology significantly predicted their prejudice toward refugees ($F = 130.0$, $p = 0.00$). Multicultural ideology explained 55.8% of the variance in teachers' prejudice ($R^2 = 0.558$). Specifically, a higher level of multicultural ideology was associated with lower levels

of prejudice toward refugees ($b = -0.74, t = -11.40, p = 0.00$). Regarding the dependent variable “integration,” the analysis showed that multicultural ideology was a significant predictor of teachers’ expectations of refugee integration ($F = 13.73, p = 0.00$). It accounted for 11.1% of the variance in these expectations ($R^2 = 0.111$). Higher multicultural ideology scores were associated with stronger support for refugee integration ($b = 0.26, t = 3.70, p = 0.00$).

For the dependent variable “separation,” the analysis showed that multicultural ideology also significantly predicted teachers’ expectations of refugee separation ($F = 8.59, p = 0.003$) and explained 8.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.081$). Higher multicultural ideology was associated with lower agreement with refugee separation ($b = -0.26, t = -2.93, p = 0.004$). Finally, the analysis demonstrated that multicultural ideology significantly predicted teachers’ expectations of refugee assimilation ($F = 19.53, p = 0.00$), accounting for 12.7% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.127$). Higher levels of multicultural ideology were associated with greater support for refugee assimilation ($b = 0.34, t = 4.41, p = 0.00$).

Table 2. Correlation between survey variables

		Separation	Assimilation	Integration	Multicultural Ideology	Prejudice
Separation	Spearman r	1.000	-.395**	-.366**	-.262**	.257**
	p	.	.000	.000	.001	.001
	v	155	155	155	155	155
Assimilation	Spearman r	-.395**	1.000	.491**	.371**	.316**
	p	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
	v	155	155	155	155	155
Integration	Spearman r	-.366**	.491**	1.000	.314**	-.290**
	p	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
	v	155	155	155	155	155
Multicultural Ideology	Spearman r	-.262**	.371**	.314**	1.000	-.750**
	p	.001	.000	.000	.	.000
	v	155	155	155	155	155

		Separation	Assimilation	Integration	Multicultural Ideology	Prejudice
Prejudice	Spearman r	.257**	-.316**	-.290**	-.750**	1.000
	p	.001	.000	.000	.000	.
	v	155	155	155	155	155

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level

Second, the issues of non-normality and heteroscedasticity identified in the previous set of variables are also present here. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed a non-normal distribution of the residuals ($p < 0.05$), while the Breusch-Pagan test revealed heteroscedasticity in some cases. To address these issues, robust standard errors were used to ensure the accuracy and validity of the results. The analysis showed that teachers' prejudice toward refugees was a significant predictor of their expectations regarding refugee integration ($F = 11.41, p < 0.001$). Teachers' prejudice explained 10.5% of the variability in their views on refugee integration ($R^2 = 0.105$). The results indicate that a higher level of teacher prejudice is associated with a lower level of agreement with refugee integration ($b = -0.25, t = -3.37, p < 0.001$).

Additionally, the analysis showed that teachers' prejudice toward refugees was a significant predictor of their views on refugee separation ($F = 8.89, p = 0.003$). Teacher prejudice explained 6.7% of the variability in their views on refugee separation ($R^2 = 0.067$). The results indicate that a higher level of prejudice is associated with greater agreement with refugee separation ($b = 0.24, t = 2.98, p = 0.003$). Furthermore, the analysis indicated that teachers' prejudice toward refugees was a significant predictor of their views on refugee assimilation ($F = 12.72, p < 0.001$). Teacher prejudice explained 7.6% of the variability in their views on refugee assimilation ($R^2 = 0.076$). The results indicate that a higher level of prejudice is associated with lower agreement with refugee assimilation ($b = -0.26, t = -3.56, p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess teachers' attitudes regarding intercultural relations in the school context, focusing on the idea of multiculturalism, their prejudice toward refugees, and their expectations for refugee students' acculturation. Regarding the research question on multiculturalism within the framework of multicultural ideology, positive tendencies were identified. Teachers seem to recognize and accept cultural diversity in Greek society. Considering Murdock and Ferrings's (2016) research, which links high levels of acceptance of multiculturalism with high educational capital, this finding may be attributed to the high educational capital that teachers possess. The strong negative correlation between multiculturalism and prejudice suggests that the more teachers acknowledge cultural heterogeneity in society, the less prejudice they express toward members of other cultural groups. This is supported by the regression model, which showed that approximately 56% of the variance in prejudice is explained by multicultural ideology.

In the study by Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi (2017), intercultural contact was found to reduce prejudice and increase acceptance of multiculturalism. Similarly, in the present study, a large percentage of teachers (91.6%) reported having students from diverse cultural backgrounds, which indicates frequent contact with diversity. This may have contributed to more positive attitudes toward multiculturalism (contact hypothesis). Furthermore, the findings suggest that teachers who display positive attitudes toward students from different cultural backgrounds and toward cultural diversity are more likely to avoid the separation strategy and instead promote the strategies of integration and assimilation. In other words, advocates of multiculturalism are unlikely to favor the separation of cultural groups.

Regarding the research question about teachers' prejudice, the findings showed that teachers evaluated the refugee group quite positively. It is expected that teachers' positive emotions help resolve issues that arise within school and social systems by encouraging a desire for dialogue and constructive intergroup behavior (Lopez-Rodriguez et al.,

2015). Moreover, both the integration and assimilation strategies were negatively associated with prejudice – which means that the greater the prejudice, the more desirable the separation strategy becomes for members of the majority group. In contrast to multiculturalism, prejudice appears to have the opposite effect: it reinforces separation and discourages both assimilation and integration.

Given the ecological context during data collection – migration flows had decreased by up to 92%, the asylum process had accelerated, and the Ministry of Immigration had moved forward with returns and relocations – this could be interpreted as a period of increased cultural security. It is likely that participants did not feel threatened by migration flows, which may explain the coexistence of high acceptance of multiculturalism and low levels of prejudice. According to Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi (2017), cultural security is positively associated with multiculturalism and negatively associated with prejudice.

Concerning the research question related to teachers' expectations about refugee students' acculturation strategies, the present study showed that teachers prefer the integration strategy for refugee students. This finding is in line with the results of Pavlopoulos and Motti-Stefanidi (2017). However, with a slight difference, teachers also expressed support for the strategy of assimilation. This second preference, as shown here, is linked to ideologies that reflect assimilationist tendencies, whereas the integration strategy does not require refugee students to relinquish or reject their identities (Hoti et al., 2017; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006).

Although the assimilation strategy – often associated with the formation of a cultural melting pot – may seem like the most pragmatic approach, helping students from “other” backgrounds adapt more easily to the school environment and succeed academically by conforming to majority norms (Baysu et al., 2011), Berry's (2017) theoretical framework on the integration hypothesis suggests that integration is actually the most beneficial. It promotes both the psychosocial adjustment and academic achievement of culturally diverse students. Additionally, the moderately positive correlation between assimilation and integration ($r = 0.49$) suggests that these two acculturation strategies may coexist.

The statistically significant, though small, difference between preferences for integration and assimilation may indicate several possibilities:

- a) Teachers may not have a clear or consistent preference between the two strategies. While integration is favored overall, the small difference in preference could indicate that teachers are divided – perhaps preferring integration in some social domains and assimilation in others – or that they perceive the two strategies as relatively similar in certain respects. Alternatively, the minimal gap between integration and assimilation may underlie the production and/or reproduction of more implicit assimilation strategies (Bowskill et al., 2007). Alternatively,
- b) The preference for integration may be more symbolic or theoretical than practical. Teachers might express support for integration because it is viewed as the more socially acceptable position, yet in practice they may still lean toward assimilation, regarding it as a natural outcome of school life (see Figgou & Baka, 2018).
- c) The small difference may indicate the influence of cultural or social pressures (see Zembylas, 2010). Teachers may feel pressure to endorse integration while simultaneously experiencing social or institutional norms that favor assimilation. This could result in reluctance to clearly choose one approach over the other, or lead to adopting a middle ground.
- d) Finally, teachers might not view assimilation as the erasure of cultural identity, but rather as a form of integration that promotes social cohesion (see Sapountzis, 2013).

It is important to note that the integration hypothesis argues that the successful integration of minority groups is achieved through the maintenance of their cultural identity while actively participating in the new society (Berry, 2017). In the school environment, therefore, linguistic diversity should not be seen as a barrier, but rather as a valuable asset to learning. This implies that teaching should incorporate students' diverse linguistic experiences, using both the mother tongue of culturally diverse students and the school's language of instruction. Rather than treating this as

a simple transition from one language to another, schools should promote bilingualism and multilingualism as skills that enhance both cognitive development and communicative competence.

At the same time, education should preserve students' cultural identity without requiring them to abandon their cultural heritage. Through targeted teaching practices and cultural activities, schools can promote the social inclusion of all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background (Tsioli & Androulakis, 2024). Beyond language and cultural identity, and in accordance with Berry's model, the process of change also involves cognitive styles, personality traits, attitudes, and acculturation stress experienced by the parties involved (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006). The importance of policy development that ensures equal representation of all groups in every dimension of daily life should be emphasized. As mentioned above, the measurement of multiculturalism through the multicultural ideology scale focuses mainly on cultural preservation and the recognition of diverse ethnic backgrounds, but does not sufficiently account for group equality or how it can be implemented in practice.

Overall, validating the idea of multiculturalism – when rooted in the school context and not applied in a vacuum – creates many opportunities for intercultural contact. More specifically, it fosters an environment in which intercultural interactions, and subsequently intercultural relationships, can develop between the involved parties (Stogianni & Murdock, 2018). Understanding acculturation expectations is crucial, as these expectations can influence the educational and psychological adjustment of refugee students in the school setting (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2008). Teachers who adopt an integration strategy and demonstrate inclusive tendencies are more likely to prevent conflicts among students when they arise in multicultural classrooms (Makarova & Herzog, 2013).

Conclusion

It is important to note that the process of acculturation is grounded in two dynamic conditions. In this study, teachers' expectations regarding acculturation strategies for refugee students were identified. However,

what remains to be examined is the extent to which refugees are willing or able to choose or consent to a particular strategy – especially considering that they often lack the freedom of choice (Pavlopoulos & Motti-Stefanidi, 2017; Zagefka et al., 2014). Regardless of the strategy that refugee students adopt at any given time – and given that individuals may shift from one strategy to another depending on emerging needs or demands in intra-individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural contexts (Berry, 2017) – their consent (or lack thereof) to integration or assimilation should not be regarded as the only culturally legitimate approach.

The findings of this study raise two important questions: (a) How significant are these attitudes to teachers themselves? and (b) To what extent are teachers genuinely committed to these attitudes? More specifically, how willing are they to embrace and support the evolving culture of the group to which they belong?

Limit of the research and future prospective

One limitation, commonly associated with questionnaire-based data collection using Likert or Likert-type scales, is the potential for socially desirable responding, which may reduce the authenticity of participants' answers. Another significant limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not fully represent the broader teacher population. Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable foundation for discussions about multiculturalism, prejudice toward refugees, and teachers' expectations regarding the acculturation strategies of refugee students within the Greek school system. It encourages further exploration of intercultural dynamics, educational policy, and classroom practice among key stakeholders.

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Adaptation of refugee children in Polish schools: Teacher-parent collaboration as a strategy for overcoming challenges

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The aim of the study is to examine teachers' opinions about the adaptation of refugee children to Polish primary schools. The research problems are as follows: What are the main challenges in the adaptation of refugee children in Polish primary schools? How does teacher-parent collaboration contribute to the adaptation of refugee children in primary schools?

Research methods: This study utilized a qualitative research strategy, combining a diagnostic survey with structured interviews and a case study method supported by observational techniques. Ten teachers from primary schools in Krakow (Poland) participated in structured interviews to share their insights into the challenges faced by refugee children.

Process of argumentation: The adaptation process significantly influences a child's school readiness, cognitive development, and academic achievement. This issue becomes especially critical for refugee children, who must overcome additional challenges within a new educational and social environment.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study's results indicate that language and cultural differences are major barriers to the adaptation of refugee children. The adaptation process is closely tied to communication, emotional

Keywords:

adaptation,
refugee child,
primary school,
teachers, parents

well-being, facilitation of learning in school, and the ongoing psychological support necessary in a new environment. A key factor determining the success of this process is the level and quality of cooperation between teachers and parents.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The adaptation of a refugee child is an extremely complex and multifaceted process that requires the involvement of both teachers and parents. In this context, an integrative approach is essential, as the success of teaching and learning depends on the quality of cooperation between these two stakeholder groups. Adaptation extends beyond language acquisition; it also includes emotional, social, and cultural support. Therefore, teachers must be adequately prepared to meet the challenges involved in integrating refugee children.

Introduction

The adaptation process plays a crucial role in shaping a child's school readiness, cognitive development, and academic achievement. This issue becomes especially important in the case of refugee children, who must confront additional challenges in an unfamiliar educational and social environment, compounded by the trauma of being forced to leave their homes due to difficult life circumstances and relocate to a foreign country, often accompanied by only one parent or a grandparent (Karbowniczek et al., 2022; Lunneblad, 2017; Murray, 2019; Januszewska, 2010; Capo et al., 2019).

Some of these challenges act as barriers and require targeted responses to improve the effectiveness of the adaptation process. Successful adaptation enables refugee children to acquire essential academic skills and social competencies needed to thrive in school. Moreover, it fosters intercultural competencies among all students – an important benefit in classrooms that increasingly encompass children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Batanero et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2020; Cushner & Mahon, 2009).

The benefits of a successful adaptation process are extensive and multifaceted. For refugee children, adaptation contributes to higher self-esteem, improved academic performance, meaningful social interactions, the formation of peer relationships, stress reduction, and the development

of individual skills and talents (Tobin, 2020; Todorovska-Sokolovska, 2010; Januszevska & Markowska-Manista, 2017). It also enhances communication skills and teamwork skills in classroom groups (Raghallaigh, 2018; Daniel et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a direct connection between the successful adaptation of refugee children in primary school and their greater social integration in the classroom, which in turn supports their emotional well-being (Maegusuku Hewett et al., 2007; Hamilton, 2003). These benefits highlight why the adaptation of refugee children is of such paramount importance in contemporary educational research and pedagogy.

Specific aspects of refugee children's adaptation in primary school

The adaptation of refugee children in primary school involves unique challenges, particularly the need to adjust to a new language and cultural environment. One of the primary difficulties for these students is learning in a language that is not their mother tongue. They must acquire the ability to understand and use the new language both in academic contexts and in social interactions with peers and teachers, which often proves to be particularly demanding (Lang, 2014). Research has shown that linguistic elements such as pronouns, adjectives, and nouns can influence the expression of intergroup prejudice (Graf et al., 2013; Perdue et al., 1990). Limited proficiency in the dominant language plays a significant role in processes of stigmatization and discrimination. The way a minority group is portrayed – even unintentionally – can shape public support for, or resistance to, social equality (Fasoli et al., 2015).

Refugee children bring with them diverse cultural traditions and unique life experiences. Integrating these elements into the school environment is key to helping students adapt and thrive academically (Mikulska, 2018). The development of communicative competence in the new language is especially crucial to successful adaptation (Szybura, 2016). Refugee children also face the challenge of balancing their family culture with the culture of the school. In educational institutions that promote

the acceptance of cultural diversity, students are more likely to feel welcomed and confident, which facilitates their adaptation process. Consequently, it is easier for them to develop communication skills and build cooperative relationships with both peers and teachers (Kornecka & Czyżewska, 2022; Mikulska, 2018; Szybura, 2016).

Effective collaboration between refugee families and teachers requires several key conditions: mutual trust, open communication (often supported by translation services), cultural sensitivity, and active school engagement with parents. When these elements are present, families are more likely to participate in school life, which significantly supports the adaptation and educational progress of their children (Garbat & Szplit, 2023). It is important to note that a lack of peer interaction often leads to reduced academic support, as children frequently learn from and assist one another in overcoming educational challenges. Furthermore, social exclusion hinders refugee children's ability to understand and connect with the culture and traditions of their host country (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2022).

The crucial issue is the social perception of refugee children and their families. As researchers point out, the term “*refugee*” can carry a stigmatizing connotation, potentially triggering unconscious discrimination against foreign children by the Polish majority (Billing & Tajfel, 1973; Fasoli et al., 2015; Trusz, 2018). When a child experiences intolerance and prejudice from those around them, it can hinder their ability to concentrate on learning. The distress caused by social and emotional challenges may distract them from their education and ultimately lead to lower academic performance (Majewska & Northeast, 2019). In such circumstances, a student may lose trust in their peers and perceive school as an environment where they do not feel safe or accepted (Nazaruk, 2016).

Overcoming the barriers to a refugee child's adaptation necessitates proactive measures within the school to promote tolerance, educate students about cultural diversity, and create an environment in which every child feels accepted and supported. In this context, *proactive* refers to deliberate, anticipatory actions taken by teachers and school staff to prevent problems and promote inclusion, rather than reacting to issues after they arise. According to Brophy (2006), proactive teaching involves planning

and organizing the classroom environment and interactions in ways that encourage student engagement, support positive behavior, and prevent conflict. This includes setting clear expectations, building positive relationships with students and families, and embedding inclusive practices into daily routines. Such an approach is especially important for refugee children, as it creates a stable and welcoming learning environment that addresses their specific social, emotional, and educational needs before problems escalate.

Collaboration with parents and students can build a welcoming and inclusive school atmosphere that supports the adaptation process (Mikulska, 2018). It is also worth highlighting the importance of structured procedures that promote inclusive adaptation by encouraging positive intergroup contact. A well-documented example is Elliot Aronson's *jigsaw classroom* technique, which promotes mutual dependence and collaboration among students by assigning each child a unique and essential role in completing a group task. This method not only improves academic outcomes but also reduces prejudice and fosters empathy among culturally diverse students (Aronson, 2002). Implementing such strategies can significantly enhance refugee children's social integration by encouraging positive peer relationships and reinforcing a sense of belonging in the classroom community.

The role of teacher-parent collaboration in facilitating a child's adaptation process

Collaboration between parents and teachers is a central aspect of successful educational practice (Musiał, 2019; Guan & Benavides, 2021; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). The effectiveness of parent-teacher collaboration significantly impacts a child's adaptation process in school. Parents possess valuable insights into their children's needs and the most appropriate ways to address them, while teachers have a deeper understanding of how the child is managing the learning process and adapting to various conditions in the school environment. The exchange of information

and experiences between parents and teachers offers numerous benefits, primarily for the student.

This collaboration should be grounded in regular communication, rather than limited to ad hoc exchanges of information and mutual expectations. Equally important is the principle of mutual trust and the establishment of true partnerships between parents and teachers. Another vital element of this cooperation is taking joint action when adaptation or educational difficulties are identified in a particular student.

Musiał (2019) identifies several obstacles to effective cooperation between parents and teachers. The main challenges include mutually demanding attitudes, a lack of trust, the tendency to assign blame for a student's adaptation difficulties, and parents' expectations that schools should prioritize academic instruction over the holistic development of students (Musiał, 2019). Górny et al. (2017) emphasize that refugee families often experience uncertainty and disorientation in the school environment, which may hinder their ability to build productive partnerships with educators. Recognizing these psychological and cultural factors is essential for developing strategies that build trust, reduce anxiety, and encourage open communication.

Practical forms of cooperation between parents and teachers in the child's adaptation process include:

- Individual meetings
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Exchange of electronic correspondence
- Collaboration in planning the student's homework (though this may be significantly limited by the demands of the core curriculum)
- Observation of the child's behavior by both teachers and parents, along with the sharing of experiences and opinions
- Joint preparation of a support plan for students facing learning or adaptation challenges
- Participation in the parents' council (Turek, 2006).

The variety of available forms of cooperation between teachers and parents is both a strength and a key factor in shaping a student's success in school adaptation. The quality of this collaboration significantly influences the effectiveness of the adaptation process and can enhance each student's educational opportunities (Zengin & Akdemir, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2024).

Research problems

Given the discussed theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence, the research problems of the present study are as follows:

1. What are the main challenges in the adaptation of refugee children in Polish primary schools?
2. How does teacher-parent collaboration contribute to the adaptation of refugee children in primary school?

Materials and methods

The study employs a qualitative research methodology. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. The research was conducted from September 2023 to April 2024. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were aligned with the research aims and addressed a predefined set of topics, including the adaptation challenges faced by refugee children, the role of parental cooperation in supporting the child's adaptation to a new learning environment, and the school's readiness to facilitate the adaptation process.

Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and analyzed for scientific purposes. For data analysis, the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. Participants' responses were transcribed and reviewed by

all researchers to ensure accuracy. Each researcher independently generated initial codes, which were then compared and discussed to develop a shared coding framework. Manual coding was used to allow close engagement with the data. Codes were grouped into categories and subcategories based on relevance, recurrence, and conceptual coherence. Themes were identified through collaborative discussion. The researchers remained in continuous dialogue throughout the analysis process to align interpretations and ensure consistency in narrative construction and thematic organization.

Participants

Ten teachers from primary schools in Kraków participated in structured interviews to share their insights on the adaptation challenges faced by refugee children. The sampling method used in this study was purposive rather than random, as participants were selected based on their direct experience working with refugee students. All respondents were women aged between 32 and 43, working as class teachers in primary schools in Kraków that serve refugee children, the majority of whom are from Ukraine. Each teacher manages a relatively large class, with student numbers ranging from 25 to 28. Their teaching experience spans from 1 to 8 years. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978); data collection was concluded when no new themes were emerging from subsequent interviews.

Results

In light of the research problems, this section first outlines the challenges faced by refugee children in adapting to primary school. Subsequently, it presents a reconstruction of teachers' views on school-parent cooperation and its perceived importance in the adaptation of refugee children within the school context.

Challenges faced by refugee children in adapting to primary school

The analysis of teachers' statements revealed several subcategories within the overarching category of *challenges in adapting a refugee child in primary school*. These subcategories include:

- perceived sources of adaptation difficulties,
- teachers' observations regarding differences between Polish and refugee students in terms of school adjustment, and
- the strategies and actions that teachers reported using to support refugee children in overcoming these challenges.

For each subcategory, specific codes have been defined, and relevant examples of teachers' statements have been selected (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of the category: Challenges in adapting refugee children in primary school

Subcategories	Codes	Examples of Respondent Statements
Sources of adaptation challenges	Communication issues	"The child experiences communication difficulties, which can result in feelings of disorientation, social withdrawal, and reluctance to engage with peers." "Refugee students often encounter additional language barriers that hinder their ability to communicate effectively and build relationships."
	Breakdown of existing ties and relationships with peers	"The disruption of established friendships from previous environments poses a significant challenge for any child."
	Heightened adaptation difficulties among boys	"Girls tend to learn more easily than boys, likely due to their faster developmental progression in early stages, which enables them to grasp new concepts faster."
	Heightened adaptation difficulties among older children	"Young children adapt more easily than older, more communicatively mature children. Emotionally, preschool children have an advantage because they are not yet self-conscious and do not worry about what others might think." "Younger children, due to their natural flexibility, tend to adapt more readily to new conditions."
	Feelings of anxiety and stress	"A child may experience stress and anxiety related to a new, unfamiliar environment. This uncertainty can contribute to increased levels of stress."
	Understanding new school rules and curriculum requirements	"Having to learn new rules and curriculum can be a challenge."

Subcategories	Codes	Examples of Respondent Statements
Differences in the adaptation processes of Polish and refugee students	Feelings of frustration and irritation in children	"For an extended period after joining the new class, refugee children often experience significant frustration and irritation."
	Provision of support and attention	"Refugee children require additional support and attention. I frequently find myself needing to explain concepts multiple times and sometimes resort to using gestures or visual aids to facilitate understanding."
	Cultural barriers and differences	"Cultural differences can contribute to feelings of alienation and create difficulties in understanding new norms and routines."
Teacher strategies and interventions to mitigate adaptation challenges	Learning environment	"I strive to establish a friendly and supportive environment." "I utilize simple language and visual aids to facilitate children's understanding of the instructions."
	Elements of play and game activities	"I organize games and activities that promote group integration and encourage cooperation." "I have frequently facilitated team-building games focused on getting to know one another, discussing shared interests, and exploring common preferences, such as favorite foods." "We also organize small group classes, which facilitate faster language acquisition for the children."
	Instructional materials	"We utilize iconographic and video materials." "There is a need for additional teaching materials tailored to the needs of refugee children."
	Collaboration with other teachers and school support staff	"I cooperate with a teacher of Polish as a foreign language to provide additional language lessons, and with a psychologist or school cultural assistant."
	Teacher professional development	"Provide professional development for teachers to enhance their effectiveness in addressing the adaptation challenges faced by refugee children."

According to the teachers interviewed, one of the primary sources of adaptation challenges is communication difficulties (cf. Code #1: *Communication issues*, Table 1). These difficulties are believed to be intensified by the stress that many refugee children experience, as well as by the disruption of established social ties and peer relationships in their home countries.

Teachers noted that boys face greater adaptation difficulties compared to girls, and that older children tend to struggle more than younger ones. For younger children, communication in Polish, which is a foreign language for them, often takes the form of play, which facilitates smoother interaction. In addition to the anxiety and fear associated with being forced to relocate to a foreign country, these children must also adjust to new school rules and curriculum demands.

The subcategory on perceived differences in school adaptation between Polish and refugee children includes codes based on teachers' observations of increased frustration and irritability among refugee students (cf. Code #1: *Feelings of frustration and irritation in children*, Table 1). According to respondents, such emotional responses require additional attention and time from teachers. Cultural differences were also cited as a source of difficulty, often requiring explanation, translation, and mutual adjustment among students.

A significant subcategory concerns the strategies that, according to the interviewed teachers, they and their schools employ to mitigate the adversities encountered by refugee students. The participants identified several recurring themes, including efforts to create a child-friendly learning environment (cf. Code #1: *Learning environment*, Table 1), the use of games and classroom activities (including integration games), organizing small-group work, and preparing tailored teaching materials such as task cards in both Polish and the child's native language. Teachers also emphasized the importance of collaboration with colleagues and school specialists, as well as ongoing professional development to improve their competencies in working with refugee students.

The role of teacher-parent cooperation in the adaptation of refugee children

The analysis of teachers' statements led to the identification of several subcategories within the broader category of *teacher-parent cooperation*, including the family as a supportive environment for the child's adaptation to a new learning setting, parent-school relationships, and overall school-parent collaboration. Codes were defined for each subcategory based on the teachers' statements (see Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of the category: Teacher-Parent Cooperation

Subcategories	Codes	Examples of Respondent Statements
Family as a supportive environment for the child's adaptation to a new learning setting	Support within the family environment	"Family is key support – kids who have strong support at home adapt more easily to new situations."
	Parental support in adapting to new conditions	"Parents can assist their child in learning the language, understanding new rules, and building relationships with peers."
	Open family communication	"When there is a lack of open communication in the family, the child may face greater difficulties as they are removed from their familiar environment."
Parent–school relationships	Parental involvement in addressing their child's needs at school	"If the parents are not interested in what happens in the classroom or the school, the child will not be either, and will treat the new school environment as temporary and unimportant." "Some parents are very involved and want to know every detail about their child's day, including whether they have eaten or drunk anything, and what activities they have engaged in. Conversely, some parents do not ask about their child's school experience for two to three months." "Many single parent-refugees, particularly mothers, may struggle to find time for school involvement due to the demands of work and the need to support themselves and their children."
	Frequency of meetings between teachers and parents	"Regular meetings and open communication with parents help build trust and develop a collaborative strategy to support the child."
	Family support	"Parents of refugee children receive support from psychological and educational counseling centers, or from school personnel such as counselors, psychologists, or intercultural assistants."
School–parent cooperation	Use of electronic tools for communicating with parents	"In the age of the internet, staying in touch with parents remotely is not a problem."
	Enhanced collaboration in response to the child's increased adaptation difficulties	"I observe that refugee parents are often more engaged because they are aware of the additional challenges their children face."

Regarding the subcategory *family as a supportive environment for the child's adaptation to a new learning setting*, the teachers who participated in the interviews emphasized the family as a crucial factor in a child's adaptation to a new educational environment. The home climate – including whether the child feels supported – significantly influences their ability to adjust to new living and learning conditions.

The subcategory *parent-school relationships* includes codes related to the importance of parental interest in their child's situation at school, their involvement in addressing difficulties in the new environment, and

the significance of regular meetings and ongoing communication with the teacher. This proactive approach helps in overcoming problems as they arise. According to the teachers, parents frequently express a strong willingness to engage with the school in order to seek support from school counselors or psychologists, as well as to access professional consultations from psychological and educational counseling centers. Communication between parents and teachers was generally characterized by openness and mutual trust.

The subcategory *school-parent cooperation* refers to respondents' opinions on how to establish and maintain regular contact with students' families. Teachers recognized the necessity of individualizing their cooperation with parents – both those of Polish children and refugee children. Individual parents showed varying levels of interest in their child's school activities and progress in adapting to the primary school setting. Teachers observed that many refugee children come from single-parent families, where the mother often bears sole responsibility for childcare while also working to support the family. As a result, these parents frequently have limited time to attend school meetings, which can heighten the child's sense of loneliness in the new environment. In such cases, teachers implement remote communication methods with parents, which, according to the respondents, have proven effective.

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that teachers place strong emphasis on collaborating with parents to address the adaptation challenges faced by refugee children. They advocate for fostering open, friendly communication and organizing regular interactions between teachers and parents. The surveyed teachers believe that close and consistent collaboration between parents and the school is a key factor in supporting the child's adaptation to a new school. It can also be concluded that school-parent relationships for refugee children are largely influenced by individual factors, particularly the varying degrees of parental willingness to engage with teachers.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' opinions about the adaptation challenges faced by refugee children in Polish primary schools and to examine the role of school-parent cooperation in supporting this adaptation.

The analysis of teachers' interviews revealed that the most significant obstacles to successful adaptation are language barriers and cultural differences. Respondents also emphasized the importance of teacher strategies and resources, parental involvement, and school-parent communication as key supportive factors.

The challenges identified in this study are consistent with findings from previous research in various international contexts. Language skills have been repeatedly highlighted as a fundamental component of successful adaptation, influencing educational progress, intergroup relations, and the formation of friendships (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Hek, 2005; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017; Tip et al., 2019). Croatian researchers have identified three core themes related to the general needs of refugee children integrating into schools: educational, language, and social needs (Vrdoljak et al., 2024).

An important finding of this study is the significance of communication between refugee parents and schools in addressing the challenges that their children face in a new educational environment. These results align with earlier research that emphasizes the necessity of involving parents in overcoming language and cultural barriers during the adaptation process for children learning in a foreign language (Lang, 2014; Kuszak, 2016). Active parental involvement in helping refugee children overcome communication and cultural obstacles is essential to their successful adaptation to school in a new environment (Skibska, 2012). The study also found that younger children and girls adapted more successfully than older students and boys. These findings are consistent with the analysis by Majewska and Northeast (2019), who identify age as a key variable in understanding the adaptation difficulties faced by foreign-language children in primary schools.

Our findings also revealed that electronic tools can be effective in helping to overcome language barriers in communication between parents and teachers. These results concur with the findings of other authors who emphasize that using a variety of organizational forms and communication tools within schools facilitates cooperation between parents and teachers, thereby enhancing the adaptation process for foreign-language children in primary schools (Turek, 2006). Research from Finland similarly demonstrates that understanding the challenges faced by migrant students – along with the methods and support systems they use to overcome these difficulties – is essential for developing effective and culturally responsive pedagogical practices (Kaukko et al., 2022).

The findings can be interpreted through the lens of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1974), which highlights the interaction between individual, family, and institutional systems in shaping child development. In this context, the school functions as a microsystem in which adaptation is supported not only through pedagogical strategies but also through relational networks involving teachers, parents, and peers. The results also underscore the importance of social capital theory: when families and schools develop trust and mutual understanding, they create a support network that enhances the child's ability to cope with new challenges (Bourdieu, 2011). These theoretical lenses help explain why strategies focused on building strong interpersonal relationships and reducing linguistic and cultural distance are perceived by teachers as effective.

Implications for educational practice

Based on the findings, the following practical recommendations can be offered:

1. There is a pressing need for additional teacher training focused on the adaptation of refugee children, particularly in fostering cooperation with parents to enhance the quality of the adaptation process.

Teacher training programs should include the use of appropriate teaching materials and address the specific needs of refugee students. Instruction in methods for teaching Polish as a foreign language, as well as techniques that support cultural integration, is essential for improving adaptation outcomes. In addition, effective communication with the parents of refugee children should be a central component of ongoing teacher training. Employing appropriate communication styles is key to building trust between parents and teachers.

2. It is crucial to equip primary schools with appropriate teaching resources, including educational materials tailored to the needs of non-native-speaking children, to help them effectively navigate the challenges of adaptation. Adequate resources are indispensable not only for the adaptation process itself, but also for expanding the educational opportunities available to refugee children. These students often encounter language barriers that significantly hinder their ability to understand instructional content and communicate with teachers and peers. By providing suitable teaching resources, schools can support a gradual introduction to a new language and culture, thereby enhancing students' confidence and motivation to learn. Moreover, access to appropriate materials enables the individualization of the learning process, which is particularly important for refugee students.

Conclusions

It is imperative to provide appropriate teaching equipment in primary schools, including educational materials tailored to the needs of non-native-speaking children, to help them navigate the challenges of adaptation. Adequate teaching resources are vital not only for the adaptation process itself, but also for enhancing the overall educational opportunities available to refugee children. These students often face language barriers that significantly hinder their ability to comprehend learning materials and to communicate with teachers and peers. By offering suitable teaching resources, schools can support a gradual introduction to a new language

and culture, thereby boosting students' confidence and motivation to learn. Furthermore, access to appropriate materials allows for the individualization of the learning process, which is particularly important for refugee students.

Teacher-parent cooperation occurs through regular meetings and contact by telephone or via the Internet. The use of electronic tools plays an important role in supporting this collaboration, particularly in light of potential language barriers in communication between teachers and parents. Open communication that considers the child's developmental needs and abilities is a prerequisite for successful adaptation in primary school. This enables teachers to better understand the individual challenges that each child faces and to adjust teaching methods and support strategies accordingly. Parents, in turn, are able to monitor their child's progress and actively participate in both the educational process and the child's adaptation to primary school.

It is also important to stress that teachers recognize the need for increased cooperation in response to the intensified adaptation challenges faced by refugee children. As a result, parents become more engaged in their children's adaptation process and communication with teachers, which can contribute to improved outcomes for foreign-language students in primary school.

At the same time, this study has certain limitations. The findings are based solely on teachers' perspectives, without including the voices of refugee children or their parents. This narrows the scope of the analysis and limits the depth of understanding regarding individual adaptation experiences and teacher-parent collaboration. These limitations will be addressed in future research through the inclusion of multiple perspectives, which will enable triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of the adaptation process in school settings.

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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 glot-todidactic 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; Tędziągolska 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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Salesian pedagogy of accompaniment in the social rehabilitation of minors

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this article is to explore whether, and to what extent, the literature on the social rehabilitation of minors in the Salesian context addresses the issue of pedagogical accompaniment and to consider the direction which this accompaniment should take. The author seeks to answer three main questions:

1. To what extent does the analysis of relevant literature and Salesian practice in social rehabilitation justify the use of the concept of the pedagogy of accompaniment in the context of social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco?
2. How can this potential concept of accompaniment be understood?
3. If the Preventive System of Don Bosco contains theoretical suggestions related to the concept of a pedagogy of accompaniment, what direction should this accompaniment take, and what dimensions of education and social rehabilitation should it emphasize?

Research methods: This article is theoretical in nature and is based on a literature analysis.

Process of argumentation: The article is structured as follows:

1. The concept of “accompaniment” in the context of education within the Salesian Preventive System;
2. The direction of accompaniment for socially maladjusted pupils/minors.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The key findings are as follows:

Keywords:

pedagogical
accompaniment,
preventive system,
Salesian social
rehabilitation of minors,
socially maladjusted
youth

1. The literature on social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System supports the existence of a pedagogy of accompaniment in the Salesian tradition.
2. In the Salesian spirit, accompanying socially maladjusted youth involves, above all, supporting the development of their identity.
3. Salesian accompaniment also includes helping young people discover pedagogical love and building master–pupil relationships. The essence of educational accompaniment lies in personal contact between educator and pupil – such a relationship allows educators to reach the heart of the young person
4. Salesian accompaniment aims to orient youth toward authority figures and support the discovery of personal values and faith, which in turn could translate into the formation of the minor's sense of values and ethical outlook.
5. In the context of social rehabilitation, accompanying minors in the spirit of Don Bosco also means being physically and actively present among the youth in creative, inspiring, and motivating ways (Salesian assistance).

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Viewing socially maladjusted minors through the lens of a pedagogy of accompaniment has pedagogical implications: young people become the main protagonists of their own education: the prime movers and dynamic agents. Salesian accompaniment requires paying close attention to young people during various activities (sports, theater, school) and to their individual abilities, inclinations, talents, and character traits. In the Salesian context, such accompaniment may be expressed using the Jesuit/Ignatian concept of *cura personalis*.

Introduction

Social maladjustment among young people is a growing problem in Poland, especially over the past few decades. It is usually considered at the social, legal, organizational, and axiological levels (Jaworska, 2012, pp. 153–154). Efforts to rehabilitate socially maladjusted youth in the spirit of Salesian pedagogy have been present in Poland since the 1990s. In the last decade, numerous scholarly publications have explored the issue of minor rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System (Stańkowski, 2015a; Stańkowski, 2018). However, an analysis of the academic literature shows a lack of publications specifically addressing the social rehabilitation of minors from the perspective of the pedagogy of accompaniment.

In light of this gap, the author aims to answer three main questions:

1. To what extent does the analysis of the literature and Salesian rehabilitation practices justify the use of the concept of a pedagogy of accompaniment in the context of social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco?
2. How can this potential concept of accompaniment be understood?
3. If the Preventive System of Don Bosco includes theoretical suggestions related to a pedagogy of accompaniment, in what direction should this accompaniment go, and which dimensions of education and social rehabilitation should it emphasize?

This article is based on a literature analysis. Its structure follows the sequence established by these three research questions.

1. Understanding the term “accompaniment” in the context of education in the Salesian Preventive System

The concept of *accompaniment* has existed in pedagogical discourse for decades. It stands in contrast to directive upbringing, understood as a non-democratic, authoritarian approach, in which coercion and asymmetry dominate the relationship between educator and pupil. In such a model, the pupil is dependent on and subordinate to the educator, and there is a risk of the young person being molded – or even harmed – according to the educator’s personal vision. In directive education, the pupil/young person does not learn independence, nor are they expected to build a relationship with the educator; obedience and subordination to formal authority are sufficient (see more in Klus-Stańska, 2005). In this context, the well-being of the pupil fades into the background, giving way to mechanisms of coercion and a tendency to treat young people as a homogeneous group.

Accompaniment in education falls within the non-directive tradition, which promotes an understanding of education as *traveling together*

with the child – being present alongside them in order to serve as an example, an authority, a companion on their journey, while demonstrating empathy and motivating them to grow. In circles that promote Christian education, the concept of a *pedagogy of accompaniment* in the Ignatian spirit is well established. From this perspective, the educator supports the pupil in achieving both their immediate and long-term goals (Marek & Walulik, 2020, pp. 153–166). The educator forms a special bond with the pupil, which becomes the foundation for guiding the young person toward the fullness of their humanity (Biel, 2004, p. 144).

The theme of accompaniment in education is also not foreign to Salesian pedagogy, which grows out of Don Bosco's Preventive System (Chrobak, 2011, p. 85). Looking at Don Bosco's life and pedagogical work with youth, one can discern a clear concept of *educative accompaniment* (Vecchi, 1999, pp. 105–117), expressed in the encounter between master and disciple (for more, see Stańkowski, 2015b, pp. 119–135). In this relationship, Don Bosco – as educator and master – sought to emphasize the subjectivity of the pupil, placing the young person at the center as the protagonist of their own life and the primary agent of their education and future (see also *Encyklopedia Dzieciństwa*, 2022). The educational relationship envisioned in Don Bosco's Preventive System was also founded on the authority of the educator, who was to serve as a father, guide, and friend to his pupils (Braidó, 1997, pp. 115–117). Don Bosco's practice of accompanying the young also included cultivating the youth's awareness of their sociopolitical environment and their role in the social, cultural, economic, and legislative life of their region.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that Don Bosco's pedagogical practice correlates closely with contemporary views on interpersonal dialogue, which is a central concept in the personalist philosophy of education. According to this paradigm, dialogue is understood as a mutual exchange that contributes to the personal growth of both parties (for more, see Szudra, 2007, pp. 271–278). Olbrycht (2022) explicitly states that “upbringing is not manipulation, personality ‘engineering,’ or the imposition of positive behavior. It is support and wise, responsible accompaniment in development, in which the pupil's own activity and motivation

are decisive.” Salesian accompaniment of socially maladjusted minors is also consistent with contemporary concepts of social rehabilitation, which foreground respect for the subjectivity of the pupil (Mudrecka, 2006, pp. 597–601).

2. Accompanying – what direction to take with a socially maladjusted pupil/minor?

2.1. Building one’s own identity

The issue of youth identity has been addressed by many contemporary researchers (Majchrzyk, 2011, p. 97). They emphasize, above all, the negative consequences of a lack of identity among youth: a schizophrenic and consumerist lifestyle and susceptibility to a materialistic approach to life (Melosik, 2005, pp. 13–31). From a personalist perspective, the process of self-formation requires the use of reason, the capacity for self-determination, and freedom – that is, the ability to take responsibility for one’s life and transform it from within (Wojtyła, 2000, pp. 151–152).

The issue of identity in education is also widely discussed in the context of the social rehabilitation of socially maladjusted minors. This problem is mainly examined by researchers representing interactional concepts (e.g., changes in social affiliation, emotional reconstruction, activation of creative potential (Konaszewski & Kwadrans, 2018), integration into a culture of need-satisfaction, or social reintegration of the individual) (Urban, 2007), as well as multidimensional concepts (e.g., developing appropriate social attitudes) (Czapów, 1978). Researchers point to the close link between social maladjustment in young people and their often unformed identities. In this context, Konopczyński (2013), among others, points to the need for altering the identity parameters of socially maladjusted individuals: rebuilding how they view themselves and their futures, including their life plans and priorities.

Scholars argue that socially maladjusted individuals exhibit signs of arrested personal development, and that the level of their social maladjustment reflects the state of their identity. In such cases, their identity

is considered “suspended” because the process of identity formation has been interrupted, and personal development is stalled. According to Fidelus (2011, pp. 293–304), remedial and corrective rehabilitation efforts should be oriented toward promoting personal development, building self-esteem, and constructing a coherent identity. Researchers emphasize the importance of subjective agency and the juvenile’s personal involvement in their own social rehabilitation, which nurtures a sense of self-responsibility (Mudrecka, 2013, pp. 149–159; Pospiszyl, 1998, p. 156). Konopczyński (2010, p. 136) points out how important it is to leverage each individual’s inherent potential to overcome difficulties and build identity through a renewed perspective on the surrounding reality.

Viewed in this way, social rehabilitation and the need to concentrate on the construction of a pupil’s identity are consistent with the principles of Salesian preventive education in the context of social rehabilitation. Accompanying a socially maladjusted minor in their process of identity formation, in the spirit of Don Bosco, means supporting their journey toward becoming a mature, good Christian and an honest citizen and human being (Leotta, 2015, pp. 33–45). This form of accompaniment in the field of social rehabilitation requires a consistent, empathetic relationship with the pupil, aimed at building a personal identity grounded in moral and religious values, according to the model of holistic human development.

To re-socialize a pupil in the Salesian spirit means, above all, to encourage the minor to ask themselves fundamental questions about their identity, purpose, and the meaning of life. Identity formation also involves guiding and sensitizing the pupil to the concept of forgiveness: both subjective (forgiving oneself) and objective (forgiving others) (Chrobak, 2016, pp. 85–106). Through this process of forgiveness, a redefinition of personal identity takes place – what might be called a kind of *metanoia*: “I forgive and know how to forgive.”

2.2. Building a master–pupil relationship

In both social and pedagogical contexts, there is a growing sense of nostalgia for the figure of the master, as the master–pupil relationship seems to be one of the most natural in education, social life, and culture.

Embracing the master–pupil model involves recognizing the positive influence that exceptional individuals can have on human development, especially on children and youth. In the field of social rehabilitation pedagogy, many scholars stress the importance of adopting the role of Teacher-Master when working with socially maladjusted minors (Bałandynowicz, 2011, pp. 7–11).

The idea of master–pupil accompaniment is also present in Don Bosco’s pedagogical practice (Stańkowski, 2015b, pp. 119–135). In this context, the unconditional acceptance of the pupil is important, as encapsulated in Don Bosco’s well-known declaration to his students: “It is enough that you are young for me to love you.” This statement reveals Don Bosco’s genuine attitude toward the pupil – an acceptance of all their strengths and weaknesses – while maintaining constructive criticism, deep empathy, and tolerance. He recognized each pupil’s individual needs and difficulties, while focusing on their personal growth and development. The essence of the master–pupil relationship in the spirit of Don Bosco’s Preventive System is attentiveness to the pupil’s desire for self-improvement and growth.

In the Preventive System, the concept of self-improvement is closely tied to respect for the pupil’s subjectivity. The development of one’s personality and psychological structure is based on nature and possibilities for development. This type of approach, favoured by Don Bosco, is consistent with the personalistic philosophy as transferred to pedagogy, in which the pupil is regarded as a subject – worthy of full respect, dignity, freedom, and uniqueness as a child of God (Marszałek, 2010, p. 711 ff). In the spirit of the Preventive System, which is steeped in personalist thought, the educator – and by extension, the educational system – must acknowledge the ontic singularity of each pupil, treating them as a unique person. Such an approach positions the pupil as an active participant in the process of education and socialization – capable of self-improvement – not as a passive recipient of educational “proposals,” but as a partner (protagonist or subject) in their own development.

2.3. Targeting authority figures

Let us begin by clarifying the etymology of the word *authority*. It derives from the Latin *auctoritas*, originating in *auctor* – meaning “man of trust,” “guarantor-witness,” “originator,” “adviser,” or “model” – and *augere*, meaning “to increase,” “support,” “enrich,” or “perfect” (Sonndel, 1997, p. 92). In today’s cultural and social context, we are witnessing both a decline in respect for authority figures and renewed calls from researchers to reinforce the significance of role models and authority in the lives of young people (Olbrycht, 2014, pp. 23–42).

The issue of authority is re-emerging in public discourse within pedagogy, as the discipline increasingly questions the nature and function of authority in times of educational crisis, as well as its place and relevance in the process of upbringing (Valisowa, 2001, p. 192). In the field of pedagogy, various concepts of authority exist. Okoń describes it as the influence of a person or organization that enjoys broad recognition in a particular sphere of social life (Okoń, 1998, p. 28). Jazukiewicz (2003, p. 254) defines authority as respect, trust, and reverence for a teacher as a scientific expert, counselor, and guide through challenges – as a source of pedagogical influence and a personal role model with whom students identify. This includes a relationship marked by the natural and voluntary subordination of pupils to the teacher.

Authority, in this sense, refers to a relational dynamic in which one person proposes the transmission of values, another acknowledges those values, and consequently submits – willingly or voluntarily – to the influence of someone widely respected by individuals or groups in a particular aspect of social life. The importance of this relationship, especially between teacher and pupil, has been noted by scholars such as Badura (1981, p. 47). Based on this educational philosophy, an authority figure is someone who helps a pupil mature, expands their competencies, and enriches them with new experiences.

Researchers in the field of social rehabilitation point out various characteristics indispensable for educators working in this area. Jaworska (2012, p. 92) argues that an educator should be able to express emotions, show understanding, and offer support – especially when working with

minors. An important contribution to the discussion comes from Machel (1994, p. 118), who maintains that behavioral change in the context of upbringing depends on the involvement of authority figures. Authority is always a condition for educational influence. Without this kind of support, any behavioral changes in minors may be superficial, driven more by calculation and the pursuit of rewards than by genuine transformation (Machel, 2008, p. 228). The authority of an educator requires possessing qualities that enable them to guide and shape a pupil's personality in accordance with social norms and expectations.

In Don Bosco's Preventive System, the educational relationship is founded on the educator's own authority, which must embody the roles of father, guide, and friend to the young. The essence of the educator's authority in this system lies in fatherly love for the pupils. From their first encounter with Don Bosco, young people were captivated by his loving and generous authority. This exceptional educator accompanied his pupils, helping them, above all, to discover and shape their life project. According to Dacquino (1988, p. 128), Don Bosco personified the "model of the good father," not only for his pupils but also for his close collaborators.

From the Salesian perspective, pedagogical authority does not stem only from the educator representing objective moral truths and ethical principles, but rather from embodying these principles – through love, friendship, and generosity toward the pupil. In turn, the pupil recognizes the educator in this way (Braido, 1964, p. 293). When working with socially maladjusted youth, educators should seek to earn moral authority, which is built through inspiring respect, trust, and affection. Understood in this way, the authority of the educator influences the pupil's motivation, sense of duty, and self-determination (Braido, 1999, p. 12; Stańkowski, 2015a, pp. 269–279).

2.4. Accompanying the journey of discovering pedagogical love (it. *amorevolezza*)

Pedagogical literature rarely addresses the concept of *pedagogical love* – that is, loving the pupil with an educational, guiding love. When discussing the professional competencies of educators working with socially

maladjusted minors, authors tend to emphasize the need for empathic understanding, interpersonal skills (Konaszewski & Kwadrans, 2018, p. 13), respect, and acceptance (Karłyk-Ćwik, 2009, p. 91). However, in such publications, in my opinion, the notion of the educator as someone who demonstrates pedagogical love in their relationship with the pupil is largely overlooked.

It is also worth noting that current juvenile law does not speak of love but rather refers to the overriding social interest, defined as the welfare of the child. In this context, concepts such as tolerance and love have to some extent been replaced by the notion of charity, and their outcomes are framed in terms of the pupil's well-being (Pytko, 2011, p. 32). In the Salesian context, however, authentic, genuine love for young people is, according to Don Bosco unconditional. From a Salesian perspective, young people are worthy of love simply because they are young. This unconditional love from the educator ensures the effectiveness of accompanying the young person on their path toward maturity and social reintegration. Socially maladjusted minors need to feel loved and to know they are loved.

Don Bosco's words emphatically express this unconditional love: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, and for you I am also ready to give my life" (*Konstytucje i Regulaminy św. Franciszka Salezego*, 1986, art. 14). Therefore, accompaniment in the Salesian spirit, particularly in the context of social rehabilitation, should center on ensuring that pupils feel loved, respected, trusted, and supported with patience and a willingness to serve.

This sense of pedagogical love is also demonstrated by Salesian educators' commitment to preparing young people for both a profession and for life (De Pieri, 2002). The pupil comes to recognize pedagogical love through this ongoing accompaniment, in the spirit of Don Bosco's principle that "education is a matter of the heart," which can only take place within the interpersonal relationship between educator and pupil.

2.5. Accompaniment on the path of discovering values and faith

Researchers agree that the secularization of society has significantly influenced young people, who increasingly express disapproval of religion and the Church. This is often manifested in a neglect or complete

absence of religious practices (Mariański, 2021, p. 201). Recent studies show that among the protective factors that help prevent risky behaviors – alongside a strong bond with family – are regular religious practice and respect for values and social authorities (Szymanowska, 2003, p. 82). Religion thus encourages all believers, including socially maladjusted minors, to turn inward to reflect on their moral values and opens up broader possibilities for effective influence on those who seek to rebuild a sense of purpose in their lives. An illuminating perspective on religion and religious upbringing is put forward by Milerski (2011, p. 137), who argues that this type of education should form the basis for meditating on human existence, ultimately leading to *metanoia* – a transformation of life and an encounter with a personal, transcendent God.

The issue of minors in conflict with the law and the religious dimension of re-education was not overlooked in the reflections and educational practice of Don Bosco (for more see Braidó, 2022). The founder of the Salesians made religion an integral part of the formation of the pupil's personality and presupposed the non-coercive participation of the young in sacramental and liturgical life (the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Confession, Marian devotion and the cult of the saints) (Motto, 2022; Niewęglowski, 2011, pp. 82-87). The aim of religious education in Don Bosco's preventive perspective is to orient young people toward salvation and encourage them to strive for holiness through self-betterment. Without religion, education would not only lose its effectiveness but also its fundamental purpose (Desramaut, 1990, p. 39). It is the religious dimension that continuously inspires young people to become active agents in their own development.

According to John Paul II, religion renders Don Bosco's pedagogy transcendent, as it aims to form the child as a believer who is inspired by the figure of Jesus Christ and becomes a courageous witness to their own faith (Jan Paweł II, 2022). In the Salesian model of education related to faith and maturity, some authors identify two additional key elements: the formation of conscience and education in love. In a time when today's youth often misinterpret the essence of human freedom and love, it becomes fundamental for education to emphasize the development of conscience

and social love (Gocko, 2011, pp. 49–52). Furthermore, the Salesian accompaniment of socially maladjusted minors on the path of discovering values and faith is certainly not aimed at converting offenders. Rather, it seeks to awaken in pupils a sense of transcendence, prompting them to seek answers to the most existential questions about their identity and the meaning of life. In this context, healing one's relationship with God and rebuilding self-acceptance based on newly discovered spiritual values becomes a vital part of the process (Stańkowski, 2018, pp. 99–104).

2.6. Accompaniment through assistance

In Salesian literature, accompaniment through assistance is understood as guiding the pupil in their continuous effort to become a good Christian and an honest citizen. Assistance, therefore, involves not only the physical presence of the educator among the pupils but also an interpersonal encounter in keeping with the personalist conception of education. At the heart of such education is the principle of accompaniment, which refers to walking alongside the young person. However, this accompaniment cannot be reduced to mere physical presence among young people. According to Cian, educational action remains incomplete and ineffective if it is not based on a personal relationship between the educator and the young person; one lived in an atmosphere of openness and trust that goes beyond personal interests and reaches into the deeper, inner layers of the pupil's life (Cian, 2001, pp. 24–26). This is made possible through the principle of accompaniment, that is, a personal encounter between educator and pupil.

The traditional oratory was once the privileged place for this kind of encounter and educational accompaniment; today, it also occurs in schools, educational centers, and parishes (Misiaszek, 2012, pp. 256–266). Vodičar (2023, pp. 1–14) even emphasizes the importance of being present among young people in virtual spaces – assisting them in the digital world. In such a context, in a family-like atmosphere characterized by a paternal and fraternal style – pupils have the opportunity to encounter genuine educational authorities. They can grow in their sense of individuality, freedom, and dignity, all within an environment shaped by Christian values.

In this atmosphere, young people feel that adults are truly accompanying and supporting them on their journey toward both human and Christian maturity (Nowak, 2008, pp. 461–464).

Conclusions

The analysis leads to the following conclusions: The literature on social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System supports the existence of a pedagogy of accompaniment, including in the Salesian context. Accompanying socially maladjusted youth in the Salesian spirit entails first and foremost supporting the development of the pupil's identity and preparing them for their future (including vocational training). In light of this, accompaniment also means helping minors discover pedagogical love (*amorevolezza*) and building master–pupil relationships. The core of educational accompaniment is precisely the personal connection between educator and pupil. In Salesian accompaniment, the pupil becomes the main protagonist in their own education: the key agent and driving force of their personal development.

Salesian accompaniment involves closely observing the pupil during various activities (such as sports, theater, and school) and attending to their unique abilities, inclinations, talents, and character traits. In Jesuit/Ignatian terminology, such personalized engagement is referred to as *cura personalis*. Furthermore, Salesian accompaniment for socially maladjusted youth seeks to orient them toward role models and to support the discovery of values and personal faith, which in turn may contribute to the development of their value system and ethical worldview.

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Miscellaneous Articles



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Student conceptualizations of international education programs and professional functioning in the free market: A data-driven inquiry

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of the research project *Comparative Study on Functions of International Programmes in Poland* (NCN, Sonata Bis, 2020/38/E/HS6/00048) was to explain the functions of international education programs in Poland. However, during the data analysis, a topic not previously anticipated emerged: students' interpretations of these programs in the context of their future professional careers in a free-market economy.

Research methods: Using a qualitative approach and a phenomenographic research strategy, we sought to deepen our understanding of students' conceptualizations of international education programs. This led us to an additional research question: What meanings do students attribute to international education programs in relation to their future professional functioning in a free-market economy?

Process of argumentation: We identified three key conceptualizations:

(a) *Pole position* – an international program as a guaranteed advantage in the race for admission to the world's top universities.

(b) *Freedom laboratory* – international schools as spaces where students can safely explore the freedom of learning, which later translates into the ability to capitalize on economic freedom.

(c) *Diamond mine* – a setting where students, independently or with minimal teacher support, consciously mine vast and unlimited reserves of academic knowledge in order to acquire unique information and skills (often unavailable in national programs) that support success in the competitive free-market environment.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Contrary to numerous previous academic claims, the neoliberal order does not necessarily have a negative impact on education. Students in international education programs do not view the free-market economy as a threat, but rather as an opportunity for global competition – which ultimately leads to financial success and the ability to fulfill personal aspirations.

Conclusions and/or recommendations : Given the continuing globalization of education, it can be assumed that the number of students participating in international education programs will grow. This trend suggests a long-term research trajectory in pedagogy, with the potential to shed new light on the complex nature of educational processes.

Introduction

The free market and education are two systems built on mutually exclusive assumptions and concepts. The free market assumes that a person is mature from childhood, endowed with complete freedom, and inherently knows what is best for themselves (e.g., which school to choose). Others are seen as competitors to be outperformed. From a neoliberal perspective, each individual is entirely responsible for their actions and life, and must bear the consequences alone. If someone fails to cope, the blame lies solely with them, and they should not expect assistance from others.

In contrast, educational theory assumes that a person is inherently immature, develops throughout life, and strives for self-improvement – aware that this ideal may never be fully reached. In the educational process, the individual is never alone as they can always count on support from other people or institutions – specifically established for this purpose. The foundation of education lies in cooperation, authenticity, responsibility, trust, and empathy.

This axiological incompatibility between the free market and education generates numerous problems and challenges (e.g., Rojek, 2019;

Michałowska, 2013; Szwabowski, 2013; Potulicka, 2011; Meczowska-Christiansen, 2010; Kargulowa, Kwiatkowski, Szkudlarek [Eds.], 2005; Rutkowiak, 2007, 2005a, 2005b; Futyma, 2002). However, it also creates a space of tension that can generate new value and educational practices – such as instruction based on international programs.

International education programs

International education programs can be seen as an educational response to neoliberal culture and the free market. They promote proactive attitudes, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, multilingualism, thinking beyond conventional patterns, creativity, curiosity about the world, originality, and efficiency – as well as sensitivity, reflection, and high ethical standards. These programs represent free-market educational offerings that mirror the neoliberal values and preferences of middle-class communities in large cities and metropolitan areas across Europe, including Poland. A distribution map¹ of schools offering the International Baccalaureate program clearly shows that they are located only in major urban centers with free-market economies.

International Baccalaureate programs are implemented and developed independently of governments and national systems. Instead, they are based on practices arising from collaboration among teachers at school, national, and international levels. Due to globalization, increased international worker mobility, the growing internationalization of the labor market, and parents' and students' search for alternatives to national education systems, these programs are receiving growing public attention. In Poland, however, the topic is relatively under-researched. Most academic knowledge about these programs is available in international publications (cf. Suits, 2023; Haywood, 2021; Jaafar, Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021; Maire, 2021; Bunnell, 2019; Wright & Lee, 2020; Gardner McTaggart, 2018;

¹ A map of schools offering International Baccalaureate is available at <https://www.ibo.org/>.

Outhwaite & Ferri, 2017; Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016; Resnik, 2014; Theokas, 2013; Doherty & Shield, 2012; Edwards & Underwood, 2012; Tarc, 2009; Cambridge & Thompson, 2004; Gellar, 2003). International education programs share certain commonly assumed features, though their practical implementation varies based on the legal, social, and cultural context of each country.

The three most popular international programs in Poland are the International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). International Baccalaureate (IB) offers four international education programs: the Primary Years Program, the Middle Years Program, the Diploma Program, and the Career-Related Program. Schools gain IB status through an accreditation process that typically takes two to three years. The IB program focuses on meeting the individual needs of each student and emphasizes the development of critical thinking and a sense of responsibility. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization, there are currently about 5,000 IB schools worldwide, and the program is implemented in more than 140 countries. Graduates of the Diploma Programme (DP) can continue their studies at universities around the world.²

Another international program gaining popularity in Poland is Advanced Placement (AP), developed by the College Board, an American organization of schools in the United States. Since 1955, the College Board has overseen the program, established course guidelines and supported the teachers involved in its delivery. The AP program is designed for high school students and allows them to gain specialized knowledge in various subjects. Currently, students can choose from 38 subjects. Unlike the IB, which emphasizes skills-based learning, the AP program focuses on mastering the content of a core academic curriculum. Instruction is centered around specific academic disciplines and concludes with a final exam.³

² More information about the *International Baccalaureate* is available at <https://www.ibo.org/>.

³ More information about the *Advanced Placement* program is available at <https://ap.collegeboard.org/>

The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) is the third most popular international education program in Poland. Developed over 30 years ago by the University of Cambridge International Examinations, it is an internationally recognized program for students aged 14 to 16. The IGCSE offers more than 70 subjects, from which students typically choose 5 or 6. Each subject is certified separately, though the program is delivered holistically. Schools can combine IGCSE with elements of their national education curricula. While the IGCSE focuses on content knowledge, it also promotes the development of critical thinking, independent inquiry, problem-solving, and collaboration. Subjects are assessed through examinations organized by Cambridge International Examinations. With its holistic approach, the IGCSE program prepares students well for the demands of higher education. Cambridge Assessment International Education provides teachers with extensive teaching resources, methodological support, and opportunities for professional development.

In the 2021/2022 school year, all three of these programs were offered across various educational stages in Poland.⁴ As of 2024, the IB program was implemented in 68 schools, IGCSE in 10 schools, and AP in 6 schools. Due to the lack of official statistics, it is estimated that approximately 1,500 teachers are involved in delivering international education programs in Poland. This figure includes both teachers working full-time within these programs and those who teach a few lessons per week, with most of their hours still dedicated to the Polish national curriculum.

Methodological assumptions of the study

The research project Comparative study on functions of international programs in Poland (NCN, Sonata Bis, 2020/38/E/HS6/00048) has been underway since September 1, 2021, and is scheduled for completion

⁴ For more details about the International General Certificate of Secondary Education, visit <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-upper-secondary/cambridge-igcse/>.

by the end of 2024. The study began with a quantitative phase using a diagnostic survey method involving 519 students and 190 teachers from Polish international schools. This was followed by qualitative focus group interviews with 112 teachers and 124 students at 22 schools.⁵ The main objective of both research phases was to identify and characterize the assumed and actual functions of the three most popular international education programs in Poland: the International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education.⁶ During the qualitative analysis, a research topic emerged that had not been anticipated at the planning stage – namely, students' conceptualizations of the relevance of international education programs to their future professional functioning in a free market and neoliberal culture.

It became clear that when given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in the survey and to speak freely during qualitative interviews, students frequently raised the topic of how free-market labor conditions influence their decision to pursue international education programs. Using a qualitative approach – which implies a circular research model (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2016, p. 80) – and phenomenography as the chosen research method, which supports the emergence of an understanding of the research subject (Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2013, pp. 66–70), we aimed to uncover and explain how students conceptualize the importance of international education programs for their future functioning in free market conditions.

⁵ The project employed both research approaches sequentially rather than concurrently; therefore, it does not qualify as a mixed methods study (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021, pp. 28–31).

⁶ Earlier results from this project have been published in the following works: Leek, 2024; Leek & Śliwowski, 2024; Dobińska & Kosiorek, 2023a; Dobińska & Kosiorek, 2023b; Rojek, Leek, Kosiorek, & Dobińska, 2023; Rojek, Leek, & Szulewicz, 2023; Leek, 2022a; Leek, 2022b; Kosiorek, 2022.

Pole position

International education programs give students a strong starting position in the race for admission to top universities in Poland and around the world, as well as access to the most attractive fields of study. This is largely because the international school diploma is not only accepted by most universities globally, but its scores often convert more favorably than those of national school diplomas. Additionally, instruction is in English, which is typically the language of instruction at the world's most prestigious universities. Programs in the fields students view as highly desirable are conducted in English, and completing them is seen as a reliable pathway to well-paid jobs – primarily in international settings – and to achieving a high economic status:

It is that even though I am studying in Poland, the IB diploma works really well for me. It means I don't have to score super high on final exams. I don't have to get 100% in all six subjects to get into the University of Warsaw, for example. – Weronika

With SGH [Warsaw School of Economics], let's say, if a student with a Polish high school diploma wants to get in, they need pretty high scores. But most of the people there are winners of academic competitions or have an IB diploma. The requirements for us are threes or fours – like, three out of seven – which isn't hard to achieve. – Antek

For the students whom we interviewed, one of the main reasons for choosing an international program was the great advantage it offers during university admissions. They are well aware of the more favorable “conversion rate,” so they conceptualize international programs as a “ticket” to their dream studies. When thinking about their future education, they most often consider the most prestigious Polish majors or foreign universities:

I think everyone is hoping to get a scholarship somewhere abroad. –
Natalia

They emphasize that international programs help them better understand the complexity of the modern world and to move confidently through this world in the future. The English language is of great importance in this as it functions as a kind of a “thinking tool” that conceptualizes the world differently than Polish and allows for more nuanced understanding:

I decided to attend a bilingual program simply because I like English, and honestly, English is even easier for me than Polish. Plus, the more languages I know, the more open the world becomes to me, I'd say. – Ania⁷

Another important aspect of international education programs – especially in relation to students' future professional functioning in the global free market – is the opportunity to choose subjects that are directly related to their personal interests as well as with their partially formed career plans:

For me, the first thought that made me decide to join the IB program was the additional subject – psychology. Psychology is my main area of interest. – Gosia

Students enrolled in international education programs approach their academic choices thoughtfully and strategically. They consider both their chances of being accepted into their desired field of study and the possibilities for financing their studies abroad. They are aware of the high costs associated with tuition, housing, living expenses, and transportation. They also demonstrate an excellent understanding of international study opportunities and frequently reference countries where obtaining scholarships or student loans for foreigners has become nearly impossible or significantly more difficult (e.g., the United Kingdom and the

⁷ Participants' data – such as students' names – have been changed for confidentiality.

United States). Even at the high school level, they are already considering not just specific career paths, but also external factors that could either hinder or support their goals. The interviews also revealed a recurring theme of students gearing up for the role of university students.

The goal of the essays and papers they write in the International Baccalaureate program is to resemble undergraduate work, mirroring the expectations of university-level assignments. When describing the international program, students refer to the qualities they believe are important for succeeding in higher education and later functioning in a neoliberal economic environment. Chief among these qualities is critical thinking – one of the key learning outcomes of international programs and the focus of a dedicated subject. Critical thinking is also integrated into other subjects (e.g., *Theory of Knowledge*),⁸ mainly through the analysis and discussion of academic sources:

I think critical thinking – although sometimes forced – is still really valuable. When we're learning, doing assignments or working with theories, there is actually an emphasis on recognizing that even professionals and experts have limitations. You have to be able to see the flaws, not just accept everything. You need to be self-critical. And also, just the ability to write longer papers, do introductions and summaries, and construct solid arguments – that's important. – Wojtek

In summary, students view international education programs as one of the most reliable ways to secure the best starting position in the race for elite universities, prestigious majors, and ultimately, the most attractive (especially in financial terms) jobs. These students are aware of the decline of centrally planned economies and want to take an active part in the free market. Their participation in international education programs is a conscious step toward preparing for that future.

⁸ *Theory of knowledge* is a subject consisting of approximately 100 hours of instruction, focusing on a scientific approach to understanding knowledge.

Freedom Lab

Schools offering international education programs are structurally distinct entities, with dedicated staff, facilities, and resources that create an environment where students can practice learning autonomy in a safe and supportive setting. This experience of taking initiative in their learning is seen as preparing them to more effectively exercise economic freedom and pursue financial goals in neoliberal conditions.

Freedom is embedded in the very nature of international education programs. Not only are these programs exempt from government control, but teachers are also free to select both the content they use to achieve learning outcomes and the teaching methods that they deem most effective. Students, in turn, enjoy considerable freedom in how, where, and when they complete educational projects and pursue learning – whether at school, in a library, or at home; independently, collaboratively, or through peer-to-peer collaboration.

The students interviewed clearly recognize this difference between international programs and the Polish core curriculum, along with the educational practices typically associated with it – and they place a high value on that distinction:

Especially in biology and chemistry, it is common to go to the lab. But under the Polish curriculum, students are just thrown into the lab without really knowing what to do. In our case, by the time we got to the lab, each of us – I'm talking specifically about chemistry here – had to come up with a research question, determine quantities, come prepared with our own methodology, and write a research paper based on it. And I know – for example, I've heard, although I haven't studied abroad myself – that the support at the beginning of university studies in Poland is quite limited. There's not much guidance on what needs to be done, how, or why. Whereas abroad there's usually some sort of introduction. So for a student from Poland, who has had a ton of theoretical chemistry – everything just on paper – it's suddenly very different to have to do something practical. That's the difference: even

though the program might not be perfect, there's definitely more hands-on experience, I would say. – Gosia

Shifting away from simply going through textbook pages and chapters toward independently selecting, preparing, and conducting experiments allows students to develop a better and deeper understanding of the world around them. This hands-on approach helps them make informed decisions – first in their studies and later in their professional lives. Additionally, learning in a foreign language and interacting with teachers from various countries and cultural backgrounds promotes the development of multilingualism and enhances students' ability to adapt to diverse cultural codes. Students also view the way lesson groups are organized as a professional advantage. These groups are made up of peers who have chosen the subject based on genuine interest:

There are about five or six of us in a class, and I think that makes a difference. Everyone chose this subject for themselves; they're genuinely interested and want to learn more about it. That changes the dynamic – it's a smaller group of people who are really engaged. – Wojtek

This structure offers students the opportunity to practice teamwork and task-based collaboration in a relatively safe and supportive setting. The knowledge, skills, and competencies developed in this way are intended to be applied in adulthood, for example, in executing business projects. The size of these learning groups also resembles the size of employee teams in corporations – a feature students see as an advantage, especially considering the roughly 50-year careers that they expect to have. Students are allowed to change groups during project work, which helps them develop flexibility, learn how to collaborate in unstable or unpredictable environments, and establish their presence in changing teams.

For these students, change feels natural; they are not afraid of it and are eager to embrace it:

Something you don't really notice here – unlike in a regular Polish classroom – is how the groups don't stand out as much. That's because we have each lesson with a different group. So in each one, we have some close friends. Since we're constantly being shuffled, the group divisions don't feel as rigid. – Kasia

The opportunity to engage in discussion, ask questions, think critically, and draw conclusions in a group of like-minded peers is particularly important to students. They also emphasize the significance of the teacher's role, especially their professionalism and personal qualities. Teachers are seen not just as instructors, but as team leaders and educational guides who provide meaningful support:

We're in a private school, so the teacher's approach is more personal. If we want the teacher to stay after class or give us extra help, they will – but of course, we have to ask for it. And that can be a barrier sometimes. – Ania

These are professors who really know their stuff – they know what good work looks like. They're familiar with every literary device out there... well, maybe not every single one. – Zosia

Students assign a particularly important role to the coordinators⁹ of international programs, who are viewed as similar to supervisors in a corporate environment:

There's no equivalent to the coordinator in the Polish system. This is the person who guides us – explaining how to attach our papers, how

⁹ The role of coordinator in international programs does not have a direct equivalent in the Polish system. The coordinator is responsible for ensuring high-quality education, supporting teachers in program implementation and professional development, overseeing both educational and administrative staff, and managing school safety. Additional duties include promoting the school's mission and values through public events, stakeholder engagement, social media, newsletters, and collaboration with local, national, and international partners and institutions.

to submit university applications, or keep track of deadlines. You can even start applying to universities with their help. They're the person who's there to hold your hand, so to speak. – Kasia

From the students' point of view, the coordinator is not just someone who manages the logistics of the international program at school. Instead, they're seen as a vital source of support – someone whose role simply does not exist in the Polish school system. The presence of such a figure is viewed as yet another advantage of international programs over national ones.

Diamond mine

Students independently – or with minimal teacher support – tap into the vast and virtually limitless resources of scientific knowledge in order to uncover unique insights and develop competencies that are difficult or even impossible to acquire through national education curricula. These competencies increase their chances of succeeding in the competitive free-market environment. Students play an active role in deciding what qualifies as a “diamond” – that is, what content is interesting and valuable for their future professional lives – and what they see as “just a rock” with little relevance:

That may be the difference – that the teacher still has some choice, a limited one, but they can choose what topics they want to cover in history. We still have those options. In math, we didn't – because of COVID – but starting next year, there will be even more choice. Teachers will be able to choose pretty much everything, I think. – Ania

Teachers are not required to accompany students through every level of the “diamond mine,” but they are expected to guide them toward areas with the highest likelihood of discovering these precious gems – places where students themselves want to explore and where intellectual

challenges, or “cognitive risks,” are greatest. Their task is to curate engaging content that students can critically analyze¹⁰ and use as a basis for inquiry. In this way, the search for knowledge becomes a shared journey between teacher and student:

But I know that once, for example, our teacher asked us whether we preferred one topic or another. So there is that element of choice, and it's already motivating, I'd say. And we all have to agree on it – it's not like you have to master everything on your own. – Wiktoria

Students complete assignments, read books, and explore resources – mainly digital libraries and online materials. With guidance from teachers, they build skills for verifying and evaluating information, or – metaphorically speaking, they learn to tell diamonds from ordinary stones:

We learn how to think, and how to think practically, so we're not caught off guard by things we had to memorize by heart. I think that's one of the problems with the Polish program – you're constantly working like an ant, and then suddenly, when it comes time to think for yourself, you can't. You've always been given everything – like even the structure of how to write a paper. – Kamil

In the diamond mine, it is important to follow your own interests, be consciously engaged, think strategically, show innovation, possess a desire to achieve, act spontaneously, be imaginative, and have courage:

I mean, there are textbooks, but in some subjects we just don't use them. Especially if the teacher is experienced and has been working

¹⁰ *Teaching through concepts* is a strategy unique to international education programs and does not exist in the Polish curriculum. Concepts – often interdisciplinary and timeless – form the foundation for multiple lessons across different subjects, helping students understand connections between areas of knowledge. Examples include creativity, feminism, change, development, knowledge, and tolerance.

in the IB program for a while – they often have a whole collection of their own materials. – Gosia

Students spend most of the school year working in this “diamond mine.” Their free time is typically divided between preparing for projects and exams and participating in extracurricular activities – many of which are also educational or focused on personal growth:

And I think it’s also largely up to the students because they’re the ones who have to find the motivation within themselves and develop an awareness of their goals. – Maja

It’s also worth noting that all in all, the IB is a very demanding program, through which we really learn a strong work ethic. I think it prepares us very well for academic work because we write research papers. So I feel like we’re able to enter student life with a slightly different mind-set – or even later on, if someone becomes an academic, they’ll approach it a bit differently than students who went through the Polish high school diploma program. – Zuzia

Students conceptualize the international program as one meant for people who genuinely enjoy working hard. They value learning and take pleasure in it. They see the world as an exciting place – not just because it offers the chance to search for “diamonds,” but also because the process is unpredictable. They never know exactly where those discoveries might be found.

Conclusion

The three student conceptualizations of international education programs identified and described in this study suggest that the free market and neoliberalism are not inherently negative forces in education, as many previous scholarly works have argued. In fact, it appears that without neoliberal culture and the free market as a socio-cultural order,

international education programs may not have achieved their current popularity – or perhaps even had the opportunity to develop and flourish globally, including in Poland. As a result, students would not have had access to an alternative educational experience outside of national programs.

Students in international education programs do not view the free market order as a threat, but as an opportunity to compete fairly in a globalized economy – an opportunity that may lead to a high standard of living, personal satisfaction, and the ability to fulfill their dreams. Given the ongoing processes of globalization, increasing international mobility, and the growing internationalization of economic relations, it is likely that the number of students enrolled in international education programs will continue to rise. This creates a new, compelling, and promising horizon for pedagogical research, one that may shed new light on the complex nature and evolving conditions of educational processes.

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Self-initiated programming activity as a factor in developing students' skills in school education: Preliminary research findings

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The study aims to examine the impact of secondary school students' programming activity on the development of specific skills in various areas of school education. It also seeks to identify factors that influence students' engagement in programming and the motivations behind their participation.

Research methods: The research was conducted in 2023 among 835 Polish students aged 15 to 19. A combination of quantitative methods was used, including frequency analysis with tabular summaries, measures of central tendency and dispersion, and statistical tests for group comparisons.

Process of argumentation: The study explores variations in students' programming engagement across different types of schools. It analyzes how participation in programming activities correlates with skill development and academic performance. Additionally, the research investigates factors that discourage students from programming and their specific areas of interest within the field.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The results show significant differences in students' engagement in programming activities. The primary motivations for participating in programming include skill development and academic success. The findings highlight the role of programming education in building digital competencies and confirm its relevance in contemporary education.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The study underscores the importance of integrating programming into school curricula to support students' skill development. It also calls for further research on barriers to programming engagement and strategies to strengthen students' interest in this area.

Introduction

The life of a modern person – regardless of age – is closely tied to computer technologies, especially the products of programmers' work. Today, the majority of data processing relies on computers and specialized software tools. School education in programming offers a wide range of learning content, but to fully prepare students for the digital era, it is essential to introduce and develop computational thinking (Iskierka et al., 2015, p. 102). Programming has become a cornerstone of digital transformation, and it is impossible to imagine the modern world without digital systems. As dependence on technology continues to grow, programming has emerged as a key skill, with professionals in this field playing a vital role in the global economy (Konecki et al., 2023, p. 40).

In the context of contemporary education, it is crucial to define programming skills with precision. For the purposes of this study, programming skills are understood as a combination of three elements: proficiency in coding, problem-solving abilities (Kalelioğlu & Gülbahar, 2014, p. 47) and knowledge of specific programming languages. This definition is consistent with widely accepted views in the literature and ensures a clear and focused framework for the study's objectives.

A particularly important concept in this study is *computational thinking* (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 403), which encompasses a range of cognitive processes related to computer science, including problem-solving, system design, and understanding human behavior through computational principles (Xue & Zhun, 2020, p. 267). The essence of computational thinking lies in abstraction and automation (Barr & Stephenson, 2011, p. 51). In Wing's original formulation, computational thinking is described as a cognitive process that involves analyzing problems and developing solutions that can be executed efficiently by humans or computers (Wing,

2006, p. 33). This perspective underscores the importance of programming education beyond simply teaching coding to equipping students with transferable skills that are applicable across various disciplines (Labusch et al., 2019, p. 105).

Area, methodology and scope of research

Empirical research was conducted in February 2023 among secondary school students in the Lubelskie Voivodeship. In this study, *personal programming activity* was defined based on two criteria: (1) students' self-assessed frequency of programming engagement and (2) a binary classification distinguishing between those who engage in programming and those who do not. This dual approach allowed for an analysis of both the intensity and presence of programming activity among participants. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity in school types, educational backgrounds, and levels of programming proficiency. The selection process was designed to minimize bias and provide comprehensive insights into students' programming engagement across different groups.

The demographic structure of the surveyed students is presented in the tables below.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

- What percentage of surveyed students engage in programming on their own?
- What are the goals and outcomes of students' self-directed programming activity?
- To what extent do students perceive programming skills as important and useful in the context of their school curriculum?

The distribution of respondents by gender is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic structure of the surveyed youth by gender

	Total	
	n	%
Gender		
Woman	366	43.83
Man	469	56.17
Age		
15–17	709	84.91
18–19	126	15.09
Place of residence		
Village	438	52.46
Small town	98	11.73
Large city	299	35.81
School type		
Comprehensive school	425	50.90
Technical school	410	49.10
Total	835	100

Source: Author's own research

Table 1 shows that the survey included 366 female students (43.83%) and 469 male students (56.17%). Among them, 709 participants (84.91%) were between the ages of 14 and 17, while 126 (15.09%) were between 18 and 19. Regarding place of residence, 438 respondents (52.46%) lived in rural areas, 98 (11.73%) in small towns, and 299 (35.81%) in large cities. In terms of school type, 425 respondents (50.90%) were attending general secondary schools, while 410 (49.1%) were enrolled in technical schools at the time of the survey.

Survey results are presented in tables summarizing response frequencies both overall and by subgroup. Frequency tables were used for nominal-scale data (Newcombe, 1998, p. 860), while ordinal data were described using the median for central tendency and the interquartile

range (IQR) for dispersion. Group comparisons were performed using the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test for ranked data (Fay & Proschan, 2010, p. 10) and the Kruskal-Wallis test for variables with more than two categories (Douglas, 2017, p. 128). The equality of proportions test was used for analyzing nominal data (Newcombe, 1998, p. 858), while feature independence was assessed using Pearson's chi-square test (Agresti, 2006, p. 168). Student grades were compared using the Student's *t*-test.

For the purposes of this study, students' age, place of residence, and academic profile were categorized. Age groups were divided into 15–17 and 18–19 years, corresponding to when students typically take computer science courses in secondary school – differentiating those currently enrolled from those who had already completed the subject. Place of residence was grouped into small towns (cities with populations up to 5,000 and those with 5,000 to 10,000) and large cities (over 10,000 inhabitants). This classification was selected to simplify the analysis by grouping locations with comparable infrastructure and services. The population thresholds were defined according to the research context to capture urban diversity relevant to programming engagement and educational opportunities. Class profile categories were used to distinguish between science-focused and humanities-focused tracks. All statistical analyses were conducted using the R statistical software (2023).

The nature of the research and the main problem under investigation require the presentation of both dependent and independent variables, along with their respective indicators. Mieczysław Łobocki defines them as follows: "Dependent variable – the real or assumed effects observed in the examined studies of independent variables ... Independent variable – the factor that determines the nature of closer interactions in which the causes of specific changes in the process of upbringing, learning, or education are identified" (Łobocki, 2003, p. 142).

Accordingly, in the context of pedagogical sciences, the measurement used and the variables adopted in this study are not direct; that is, they cannot be observed outright. It is also important to emphasize that the operationalized indicators are reflected in the research tool that we developed.

Results of the author’s empirical research

Table 2 presents the responses regarding students’ self-initiated activity in programming.

Table 2. Declarations of self-initiated programming activity among the surveyed youth

Students' declarations of self-initiated activity in programming	Number of respondents	%
	No	572
68.5	Yes	263
31.5	Total	835

Source: Author’s own study

The analysis of the results in Table 2 shows that fewer than one-third of respondents – 263 individuals, or 31.5% – reported engaging in their own programming activities. In contrast, more than two-thirds – 572 individuals, or 68.5% – stated that they do not participate in such activities. Table 3 presents the respondents’ declarations regarding self-initiated programming activity, broken down by gender.

Table 3. Self-initiated programming activity among respondents – Comparison by gender

Students' declarations of self-initiated activity in programming	Gender				Total Woman	
	Man		n			
	%	n	%	n	%	Yes
46	12.57	217	46.27	263	31.50	No
320	87.43	252	53.73	572	68.50	Total
366	100	469	100	835	100	Chi-square test
result: p < .001						

Source: Author’s own study

The analysis of the results shows a significant difference between male and female respondents in their declarations of taking up programming activities. A substantially higher percentage of men (46.27%) reported engaging in programming on their own compared to women (12.57%). The numerical summary in the table reveals a statistically significant gender-based difference ($p < 0.001$) in self-initiated programming activities. Thus, it can be concluded that gender significantly influences students' engagement in programming.

Another important variable is the type of school, as it affects both the quality and focus of education. Table 4 presents data on students' declarations of participating in programming activities, broken down by school type.

Table 4. Self-initiated programming activity among respondents – summary by school type

Students' declarations of self-initiated activity in programming	School type				Total	
	Technical school		n		Comprehensive school	
	%	n	%	n	%	Yes
71	16.71	192	46.83	263	31.50	No
354	83.29	218	53.17	572	68.50	Total
425	100	410	100	835	100	Chi-square test
result: $p < .001$ "						

Source: Author's own study

An analysis of the data in Table 4 reveals a significant difference between students attending comprehensive schools and those in technical schools. A greater percentage of technical school students (46.83%) report engaging in programming activities compared to students from comprehensive schools (16.71%). Statistical analysis ($p < 0.001$) confirms that the type of school significantly influences participation in programming.

The structure of school education is also shaped by the academic track. Table 5 presents data on students' declarations of self-initiated

programming activity, broken down by academic track among comprehensive school students.

Table 5. Self-initiated programming activity among surveyed comprehensive school students – summary by academic track

Students' declarations of self-initiated activity in programming	Academic track				Total Humanities	
	Science		n			
	%	n	%	n	%	Yes
12	8.28	59	21.07	71	16.71	No
133	91.72	221	78.93	354	83.29	Total
145	100	280	100	425	100	Chi-square test
result: p-value < 0.001						

Source: Author's own study

The data in Table 5 show that most students who engage in programming come from science-oriented classes (21.07%), while the majority of those who do not engage are from humanities classes (91.72%). Notably, a higher percentage of students from science classes (21.07%) reported pursuing programming activities compared to those from humanities classes (8.28%). The statistical analysis ($p < 0.001$) confirms that class profile significantly influences participation in programming activities.

Therefore, as follows from the above analyses of students' declarations, the variables of gender, type of school, and class profile significantly affect engagement in programming. However, the analysis shows no statistically significant influence from the variables of age and place of residence. Table 6 presents data on the specific areas in which the respondents engage in programming activities, broken down by gender.

Table 6. Areas of self-initiated programming activity as reported by students – by gender

Self-initiatedprogramming activity area	Gender				Total	
	Woman		Man			
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Only during school lessons (various subjects)	13	28.26	24	11.06	37	14.07
Only outside of school	7	15.22	38	17.51	45	17.11
Both during and outside of school	26	56.52	155	71.43	181	68.82
Total	46	100	217	100	263	100
Chi-square test result: p = .009						

Source: Author's own study

Among female students engaged in programming, the majority reported participating in teaching, both inside (56.52%) and outside (28.26%) the classroom, while 15.22% reported involvement in extracurricular programming activities. In comparison, male students also prioritized learning (68.82%) inside and outside the classroom, with 17.11% participating in extracurricular programming and only 14.07% programming during school hours. A statistically significant gender difference ($p = 0.009$) was observed in the choice of programming activity areas.

Another research question concerns the characteristics of students' self-initiated programming activities, specifically their goals and outcomes. The starting point for the analysis was to identify the goals that motivate students to undertake programming independently. When completing the questionnaire, respondents were allowed to select more than one goal guiding their participation in programming. The goals listed in the table include acquiring programming skills, developing logical thinking, and nurturing a personal passion. Reported outcomes of such activities include achieving high grades, improving academic performance, and planning a future career as a programmer. In light of these findings, the study also examines the relationship between students' goals for programming and variables such as gender, age, place

of residence, type of school, and class profile. Table 7 presents data on students' declared goals for pursuing programming activities, categorized by place of residence.

**Table 7. Declared goals for engaging in programming activities –
by place of residence**

Goals of self-initiated programming activity	Place of residence						Total	
	Village, N = 303		Small town, N = 93		Large city, N = 260			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Achieving high grades	21	6.93	13	13.98	19	7.31	53	8.08
Improving school performance	34	11.22	6	6.45	18	6.92	58	8.84
Gaining programming skills	98	32.34	26	27.96	80	30.77	204	31.10
Developing logical thinking skills	53	17.49	13	13.98	64	24.62	130	19.82
Pursuing a personal interest	47	15.51	21	22.58	39	15.00	107	16.31
Planning a future career in programming	43	14.19	14	15.05	39	15.00	96	14.63
Other (please specify)	7	2.31	0	0.00	1	0.38	8	1.22
Total	303	100	93	100	260	100	656	100
Chi-square test result: $p = .032$								

Source: Author's own study

The analysis of the numerical summary presented in the table above shows a statistically significant relationship between place of residence ($p = 0.032$) and the goals and outcomes associated with programming activity. Therefore, it can be concluded that place of residence significantly influences the reasons for which students engage in programming. However, the analysis also reveals no statistically significant differences between gender ($p = 0.54$), age ($p = 0.2$), or class profile ($p = 0.4$) in relation to the goals and outcomes of programming activity.

Based on the above analysis of students' declared goals and outcomes related to their programming activity, it can be concluded that their

main motivations are skill acquisition. In terms of perceived outcomes, improving academic grades was partially confirmed. Most respondents cited acquiring programming and logical thinking skills as their main goals, while the most frequently mentioned long-term outcome was pursuing a career as a programmer.

The analysis in Table 7 shows that among students living in rural areas, the most commonly stated goal for engaging in programming activities is to acquire programming skills (32.34%). As for outcomes, the most frequently mentioned effect is the intention to pursue a career as a programmer in the future (14.19%). In small towns, the primary goal is also to acquire programming skills (27.96%), with the most frequently indicated outcome being a plan to become a programmer in the future (15.05%). Among students from large cities, the main goal is again to acquire programming skills (30.77%), while the most common intended outcome is a future career in programming (15.00%). The analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in programming-related goals and outcomes based on place of residence ($p = 0.032$). However, no significant differences were observed based on gender ($p = 0.54$), age ($p = 0.2$), or academic track ($p = 0.4$).

As a specific supplement to the main findings on students' programming-related goals, several respondents provided additional comments. Selected responses are presented below:

"I want to become a programmer in the future, so learning programming at home helps me gain more skills than what I get at school."

"I prefer learning programming at home because I can dedicate more time to it and even add a graphical interface to my programs."

"I want to learn programming, but in a different language. The one taught at school is outdated and of little use for the future."

"I'm just starting to learn programming. I'm not doing well at school, so I'm trying to catch up at home."

"I prefer learning from online tutorials on YouTube—there's more interesting and useful content there."

"I like programming. It's great to be able to create something useful."

“Programming is my passion and hobby. I hope to work in this field and earn a lot of money.”

“As soon as I get a programming job in Poland, I plan to move abroad to work in the profession.”

In the responses above, students indicate that school does not always meet their expectations regarding what they would like to learn in programming. They note that the curriculum often focuses on computer programs whose results are displayed via a console interface and lack a graphical interface. Another concern raised is that programming languages taught are outdated and rarely used in modern contexts. Respondents also pointed out that a key motivation for learning programming is the potential for high salaries and the opportunity to work in this profession abroad.

Based on the above analyses regarding the declared goals and outcomes of programming activities, the following conclusions can be drawn: in terms of goals, the surveyed group aims to acquire relevant competencies; in terms of outcomes, the goal of achieving higher grades is only partially confirmed. Most respondents expressed a desire to develop programming and logical thinking skills, while the most frequently indicated outcome was pursuing a career as a programmer.

Another specific area of investigation concerned the extent to which programming skills acquired in computer science classes are useful in other areas of schoolwork. To assess students' responses regarding the usefulness of programming skills in other school subjects, results were measured on an ordinal scale. The non-parametric Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was applied. The grading scale used was as follows: 5 – very high, 4 – high, 3 – medium, 2 – low, 1 – not useful. Table 8 below presents the results of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test and the Kruskal-Wallis test regarding the perceived usefulness of programming skills in other school subjects, analyzed by gender.

Table 8. Rank classification of the usefulness of programming skills in other school subjects by gender

Test result	Gender			p-value*
	Woman, N = 366	Man, N = 469		
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00; 5.00)		3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
Test result	Place of residence			p-value**
	Village, N = 438	Small town, N = 98	Large city, N = 299	
Median (IQR)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	0.001
Test result	School type			p-value*
	Comprehensive school, N = 425		Technical school, N = 410	
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00; 5.00)		3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
*Result of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney rank test				
**Result of the Kruskal-Wallis test				

Source: Author's own study

The data in Table 8, with $p < 0.001$, indicates that programming skills have a statistically significant impact on other school activities when analyzed by gender. Similarly, in Table 8, with $p = 0.001$, programming skills also show a significant effect on the usefulness of other school activities based on the respondents' place of residence. This leads to the next research question: Do variables such as gender, place of residence, type of school, age, and class profile significantly differentiate respondents' assessments of the usefulness of programming skills in achieving school success – specifically in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values?

Given that the responses related to the degree of usefulness of programming skills for school success were measured using an ordinal scale (ranks), the non-parametric Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was applied. The data presented in Table 9 show the results of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, assessing the declared degree of usefulness of programming skills for achieving school success, broken down by gender.

**Table 9. Rank classification of the usefulness of programming skills
for achieving school success – comparison by gender**

School achievement dimension	Gender		p-value*
	Woman, N = 366	Man, N = 469	
Knowledge	3.00(1.00;5.00)	3.00(1.00;5.00)	<0.001
Skills	3.00(1.00;5.00)	4.00(1.00;5.00)	<0.001
Attitudes	3.00(1.00;5.00)	3.00(1.00;5.00)	<0.001
Behaviors	2.00(1.00;5.00)	3.00(1.00;5.00)	<0.001
Values	2.50(1.00;5.00)	3.00(1.00;5.00)	<0.001
*Result of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney rank test			

Source: Author's own study

Gender significantly influences how respondents assess the usefulness of programming skills for academic achievement, with notable differences observed in the areas of knowledge ($p < 0.001$), skills ($p < 0.001$), attitudes ($p < 0.001$), behavior ($p < 0.001$), and values ($p < 0.001$). However, respondents' age does not significantly impact their assessment of the usefulness of programming skills for school achievement, as indicated by the following p -values: knowledge ($p = 0.2$), skills ($p = 0.3$), attitudes ($p = 0.7$), behavior ($p = 0.7$), and values ($p = 0.13$). The data presented in Table 10 show the results of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney non-parametric test assessing the declared usefulness of programming skills in achieving academic success, taking into account the type of school.

Table 10. Rank classification of the usefulness of programming skills for academic achievement – comparison by type of school

School achievement dimension	School type		p-value*
	Comprehensive school, N = 425	Technical school, N = 410	
Knowledge	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
Skills	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	4.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
Attitudes	2.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
Behaviors	2.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
Values	2.00 (1.00; 5.00)	3.00 (1.00; 5.00)	< 0.001
*Result of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney rank test			

Source: Author's own study

The analysis of the data in Table 10 indicates that the type of school attended by the respondents significantly influences their assessment of the usefulness of programming skills for academic achievement. This effect is observed across all evaluated domains – knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavior, and values – with all p-values less than 0.001. Additionally, place of residence significantly differentiates respondents' views on the usefulness of programming skills in terms of knowledge ($p = 0.014$) and skills ($p = 0.010$). However, when it comes to attitudes ($p = 0.9$), behaviors ($p = 0.5$), and values ($p > 0.9$), respondents from different locations tend to assess the usefulness of programming skills similarly.

Regarding academic track, it significantly affects respondents' assessments of the usefulness of programming skills in acquiring knowledge ($p = 0.011$). However, for skills ($p = 0.095$), and for attitudes, behaviors, and values (all $p > 0.9$), respondents from different class profiles reported similar evaluations. To summarize the findings on how programming skills contribute to students' academic success: in terms of knowledge, respondents rated the usefulness of programming skills at a moderate level; in terms of skills, at a low level; and in terms of attitudes, behaviors, and values, at a high level.

It is essential to organize classes that help students understand the benefits and advantages of learning programming – especially how programming skills can be applied in various academic contexts. Raising awareness about the wide applicability of programming in daily life, as well as its potential use in other school subjects, may positively influence students' academic performance. Since the desire to acquire programming skills is a key factor motivating students to engage in programming, it is important to foster the development of young people's values and norms in this area.

Conclusions

The research results presented here show that nearly one-third of the surveyed students engage in their own programming activities. This can be considered at least a satisfactory outcome, particularly since the study group was not limited to students from computer science-focused classes. This suggests a diverse interest in programming, influenced by both class and school type. Students from technical secondary schools and science-track classes were much more likely to report engaging in their own programming activities than those from general education schools and humanities-track classes.

In terms of goals, students' self-directed programming activities were mainly driven by a desire to build competencies, while the effect of achieving higher grades was only partially confirmed. The results of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney non-parametric test for rank classification show that the surveyed students perceive programming skills as having a medium to high level of usefulness in other school subjects.

Programming education plays a vital role in the advancement of modern information technology and in shaping various aspects of human life. It not only addresses current demands, but also constitutes a key driver for development across all areas of human activity. As such, education in this field is essential. Recognizing these needs allows government institutions to exercise statutory oversight of programming education for children and school-age youth.

The findings presented in this study suggest the need for further, more in-depth research to better understand the disparities observed between schools and the factors influencing students' engagement in programming. The next phase of this research will involve examining not only the reasons behind students' decisions not to engage in programming activities, but also the potential structural or environmental barriers contributing to these choices. Additionally, the study will examine the nature of students' self-directed programming activities, the types of programming tasks that they undertake both in and outside of school, and the relationship between educational settings and individual interests in programming. These efforts will allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the results and a deeper exploration of the underlying mechanisms.

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Pedagogical university students' ethical attitudes and competences regarding artificial intelligence: An empirical study

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The aim of the research was to examine the self-assessment and views of students from a pedagogical university on the ethical and moral aspects of using AI and their relationship with general attitudes toward AI, as well as competences and knowledge in this area.

Research methods: The diagnostic survey method was used, including an original questionnaire and the General Attitudes toward Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS). The study sample consisted of 226 participants.

Process of argumentation: The article begins with an introductory section, followed by a presentation of the research methodology and the results obtained. It concludes with a discussion of the main findings.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Analysis of the responses showed that 65.04% of respondents always follow ethical principles when using AI, and 67.70% are mindful of privacy and information security issues. 50.45% believe that using AI for assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism, while only 45.13% consider it morally wrong. Respondents support regulations for the use of AI (72.12%) and favor preparing students

for the ethical use of AI in their future work (85.84%). They are largely opposed to banning AI in educational institutions (69.47%). Students expressed more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI ($M = 3.22$) than levels of understanding of its disadvantages ($M = 2.72$). Respondents rated their competences ($M = 2.65$) and knowledge ($M = 2.85$) regarding AI as below average.

Correlation analysis revealed that students who had more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI, a better understanding of its disadvantages, and a higher self-assessment of AI competence were less willing to agree that:

- using AI for assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism and is morally wrong;
- regulations should be developed to define the extent of AI use in education;
- the use of AI in educational institutions should be banned.

Furthermore, students with more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI were:

- more likely to support the idea that students should be prepared for the ethical use of AI in their future professional work.

Conclusions and recommendations: The research conducted constitutes an important starting point for a more in-depth analysis of students' knowledge and behavioural patterns in the context of AI use. The findings indicate that students generally exhibit a positive attitude towards the implementation of AI tools in educational settings and recognize their potential in both teaching and learning processes.

However, a concerning trend emerges: individuals who have higher levels of competence in using AI and who display a favorable attitude towards the technology often do not perceive a need for introducing regulations governing its use in educational institutions. Furthermore, they frequently do not view the use of AI in completing assignments or exams as a form of unethical conduct, such as cheating or plagiarism.

In light of these findings, the issue of properly preparing future teachers and specialists for working in environments where AI may become an integral element of children's and adolescents' education becomes particularly important. Accordingly, it is essential to incorporate topics related to the use of artificial intelligence into higher education curricula, with particular attention to ethical and moral considerations.

Introduction

Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted to understand the mechanisms underlying the acceptance or rejection of technologies, including those based on artificial intelligence (AI) (see, e.g., Chatterjee & Bhattacharjee, 2020; Choi et al., 2023; Hong, 2022). Some of these studies have focused on the technical aspects of AI-based technologies, others on user motivations and human–AI interaction (Lv et al., 2022; McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019), and still others on the role of ethics in decision-making processes, particularly in educational contexts (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022).

A wide range of tools has been used in research to assess attitudes towards AI. Each has its strengths and limitations, and each emphasizes particular variables. For instance, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis et al., 1989) examines the cause-and-effect relationships between perceived usefulness, ease of use, user attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual technology usage. The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003) identifies four key constructs: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. The updated UTAUT2 (Venkatesh et al., 2012) expands the model for consumer contexts with hedonistic motivation, price value, and habit. In turn, the AI AIDUA model combines self-efficacy, technology acceptance, and AI ethics into an integrated framework (Shao et al., 2024). The General Attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS) (Schepman & Rodway, 2020, 2023) measures the psychological correlates of attitudes towards AI.

User attitudes towards AI are highly diverse and determined by numerous factors, such as the level of technological knowledge, prior experience, trust in digital systems, and socio-cultural context. A key element that determines the acceptance, implementation, and use of new technologies is the user's attitude towards a given innovation. When users recognize the benefits of using AI, exhibit curiosity, and do not fear loss of control or privacy, they are more likely to change their behavior. Such an attitude promotes openness to experimenting with technology and a stronger

motivation to explore and regularly use AI in everyday life or work. As Galindo-Domínguez et al. (in press) point out, a positive attitude is the first and essential step in the process of technological adaptation, which can lead to the permanent integration of AI into various areas of user activity.

We are witnessing the rapid evolution of AI and its growing presence in nearly every aspect of our lives. At this stage, the consequences and effects of its use, particularly in science and education, are still unpredictable. Generative artificial intelligence (GEN AI) offers a wide range of capabilities, such as text generation and edition, collecting source materials, analysis of various sources, task-solving, and developing scientific projects. In early 2023, media reports indicated that ChatGPT had passed law exams in four subjects at the University of Minnesota and a business management exam at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business (*Sztuczna inteligencja...*, 2023).

The vast majority of university students in Poland believe that AI should be permitted in educational settings (Wieretilo, 2023), while also calling for the introduction of clear regulations regarding its use (Malmström, Stöhr & Ou, 2023; Wieretilo, 2023). In the UK, one in three students used ChatGPT or other AI tools at least once a week in 2023, and one in nine used them daily (The Knowledge Academy, 2023). Over time, studies have documented an upward trend in the use of AI in educational contexts (Nam, 2023; Welding, 2023). Teachers, too, generally view the possibility of using AI in teaching positively, though they often have limited knowledge of how these tools can support their practice (Chounta et al., 2022; Galindo-Domínguez et al., in press; Polak et al., 2022).

With every advantage come disadvantages. In the case of AI, we can point to issues such as the spread of disinformation, copyright infringement, hallucinations, or academic dishonesty – specifically, when users present AI-generated work as their own without acknowledging that it was produced with the help of artificial intelligence. The ease with which AI can analyse documents, write essays, or draft reviews creates a strong temptation to use it and reduce the time required to complete these tasks independently. Improper use of AI may lead to unreliable research, data fabrication, and the spread of false information.

Holden Thorp (2023), editor-in-chief of *Science*, notes that only 63% of abstracts generated by ChatGPT were identified as such by academic reviewers. AI is also capable of producing articles that can pass the editorial review process (Grimaldi & Ehrler, 2023), although AI-generated content – scientific or otherwise – is more likely to contain factual errors (Fyfe, 2023; Ma et al., 2023; Shin & Park, 2019). Consequently, there is growing concern about the ethical use of artificial intelligence in academic work (Grimaldi & Ehrler, 2023; Pourhoseingholi et al., 2023; Xiao, 2023).

Problems and purpose of research

The aim of the study was to understand education students' self-assessment and views on the ethical and moral aspects of using artificial intelligence (AI), and how these relate to their general attitudes towards AI, as well as their competences and knowledge in this area. The study was exploratory, and thus no research hypotheses were formulated. The following research questions were posed:

1. What is students' self-assessment of the ethical use of AI?
2. What are students' views on the ethical and moral aspects of AI use in various areas?
3. What are students' attitudes towards AI?
4. How do students assess their knowledge and competences related to AI?
5. Are there relationships between students' self-assessment and views on the ethical and moral aspects of AI use, and their positive and negative attitudes towards AI, as well as their self-assessed knowledge and competences in this area?

Research method and sample characteristics

The study used the diagnostic survey method and survey technique. The research tool was an original questionnaire, which included a summary, seven statements regarding the moral and ethical aspects of using AI, two statements on self-assessment of knowledge and competences in this area, and the General Attitudes toward Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS) (Schepman & Rodway, 2020, 2023). The GAAIS assesses general attitudes towards AI and includes two subscales: one measuring positive attitudes toward the benefits of AI, and the other measuring attitudes towards its disadvantages.

Both the English and Turkish versions of the GAAIS have demonstrated good psychometric properties (Schepman & Rodway, 2020, 2023; Kaya et al., 2024). In accordance with applicable ethical research guidelines, the authors' permission was obtained to use and translate the tool into Polish for the purposes of this study. The translation process included both translation and back-translation by English language specialists. The internal consistency of the Polish version of the GAAIS subscales was confirmed by calculating Cronbach's alpha: 0.847 for the positive subscale and 0.805 for the negative subscale.

The research was conducted online in May 2024. All participants gave informed consent to participate. The study population consisted of students from the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw. A total of 239 responses were received. The responses of 13 participants (5%) were excluded due to failure to complete the attention checks in the GAAIS questionnaire correctly. Ultimately, the study sample consisted of 226 students, representing all academic years and fields of study offered by the university.

The majority of respondents were women ($n = 189$; 83.63%), while only 8.85% were men ($n = 20$). Eight non-binary individuals (3.56%) participated in the study. The same number of respondents ($n = 8$; 3.56%) selected the "I don't want to answer" category, and one person (0.44%) did not respond. The youngest participant was 18 years old, and the oldest was 55. The average age of respondents was 22.66 years ($SD = 5.52$; $Me = 21$).

Data analysis procedure

The data was processed using MS Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics. A statistical description of ordinal variables was performed, including basic indicators – count and frequency – as well as quantitative measures, for which the mean (M), median (Me), standard deviation (SD), minimum (Min), and maximum (Max) were calculated.

To determine correlations, variable categories were assigned ranks using the following scale:

I strongly agree – 5, I somewhat agree – 4, I have a neutral opinion – 3, I somewhat disagree – 2, I strongly disagree – 1.

Spearman's non-parametric rank correlation test was used, with a 5% margin of error assumed (significance level $p < 0.05$).

Results

Ethical and moral aspects of using AI

Students were asked to respond to seven statements regarding various ethical and moral aspects of using artificial intelligence. The detailed distribution of responses is presented in Table 1. The first two statements concerned the respondents' behaviour. A majority of students agreed with Statement 1¹: a total of 65.04% ($n = 147$) selected either "I strongly agree" or "I somewhat agree." One in four respondents gave a neutral response, which indicates that they were either unwilling or unable to assess whether they follow ethical principles when using AI. One in ten admitted that they do not follow these principles; "I somewhat disagree" and "I strongly disagree" were selected by a total of 10.62% of respondents ($n = 24$).

Statement 2, also related to behaviour, was phrased in reverse. Here, 67.70% ($n = 153$) disagreed with the statement, while 18.14% ($n = 41$)

¹ The full wording of the analyzed statements is provided below in Table 1.

confirmed its truth. Slightly fewer respondents than in the case of the first statement, 14.16%, were unable or unwilling to assess their behaviour in this regard.

Table 1. Ethical and moral aspects of using AI

Response categories	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly disagree	3	1.33	63	27.88	17	7.52	17	7.52	7	3.10	3	1.33	60	26.55
Somewhat disagree	21	9.29	90	39.82	30	13.27	47	20.80	9	3.98	5	2.21	97	42.92
Neutral	55	24.34	32	14.16	65	28.76	60	26.55	47	20.80	24	10.62	42	18.58
Somewhat agree	86	38.05	35	15.49	59	26.11	56	24.78	60	26.55	74	32.74	16	7.08
Strongly agree	61	26.99	6	2.65	55	24.34	46	20.35	103	45.58	120	53.10	11	4.87

Source: Authors' research

Statements:

- 1. When using applications or products based on artificial intelligence systems, I always comply with ethical principles;*
- 2. I never pay attention to privacy and information security issues when using applications or products based on artificial intelligence systems;*
- 3. Using tools based on artificial intelligence systems to complete assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism;*
- 4. Using tools based on artificial intelligence systems to solve tasks and exams is morally wrong;*
- 5. It is worth developing regulations that will determine the extent to which students, pupils, and teachers can use artificial intelligence in education (writing programs, diploma theses, articles, scenarios, etc.);*
- 6. It is worth preparing students to ethically use tools based on artificial intelligence systems in their future professional work;*
- 7. All tools based on artificial intelligence systems should be banned in educational institutions.*

The next statements concerned the respondents' views on the ethical and moral aspects of using AI in various areas. The first one was about completing tasks and exams. Slightly more than half of the respondents (50.45%; $n = 114$) believed that such use constitutes cheating or plagiarism, and 20.79% ($n = 47$) were of the opposite opinion. Almost one-third of the respondents had a neutral opinion. A similar distribution of answers was observed for statement 4.

45.13% ($n = 102$) of respondents agreed with this statement, while 28.32% ($n = 64$) disagreed. One in four respondents had no opinion on this subject. The respondents (72.12%; $n = 163$) supported the development of regulations that would determine the extent to which students, pupils, and teachers can use artificial intelligence in education. Only 7.08% ($n = 16$) did not see such a need, and one in five did not take a position, selecting the category "I have a neutral opinion." The respondents also supported preparing students to ethically use AI-based tools in their future careers (85.84%; $n = 194$). Only eight people (3.54%) disagreed, and one in ten respondents did not express an opinion.

It is worth emphasizing that although the surveyed students appear to support the use of AI in educational institutions (69.47%; $n = 157$), 11.95% ($n = 27$) agreed with statement 7, and one in five respondents had a neutral opinion.

Attitudes towards AI,² self-assessment of knowledge and competences in the field of AI

Table 2 presents the indicators determined for the GAAIS subscales. A higher mean score was found for the positive scale ($M = 3.22$) than for the negative scale ($M = 2.72$). Students have more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI than understanding attitudes towards its disadvantages. Respondents demonstrated above-neutral attitudes towards

² For more information, see the authors' article "Students' attitudes towards artificial intelligence and their digital competence."

AI on the positive subscale and slightly below-neutral attitudes on the negative subscale. It is worth emphasizing that the variation in results on the negative subscale was greater than on the positive one.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the GAAIS subscales

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Positive GAAIS	3.22	0.653	3.25	1.17	4.50
Negative GAAIS	2.72	0.751	2.63	1.13	4.63

Source: Authors' research

The respondents rated their knowledge of AI and their competences related to its use on a five-point scale, where 1 represented a very low rating and 5 a very high rating. The calculated indicators are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Self-assessment of knowledge and competences regarding AI

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Level of knowledge about AI	2.85	0.877	3	1	3
Competencies in the use of AI	2.65	0.987	3	1	5

Source: Authors' research

The average assessment of the level of knowledge about AI ($M = 2.85$) is higher than the assessment of competences related to its use ($M = 2.65$). In both cases, however, the ratings are below the neutral midpoint. Respondents' assessments of their competences in using AI show greater variability than their assessments of knowledge about AI.

Correlations

To determine the relationships between students' self-assessment and their views on the ethical and moral aspects of using artificial intelligence, as well as their general attitudes towards AI and their assess-

ments of knowledge and competences in this area, an analysis of Spearman's rank correlation coefficients was carried out. The results are presented in Table 4. No correlations were found between the variables analyzed and the level of agreement with statements 1 and 2 only.

Table 4. Correlations (Spearman's rho) between the analyzed variables

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Positive GAAIS	<i>Spearman's rho</i>	-0.088	0.095	-0.291	-0.283	-0.207	0.154	-0.505
	<i>p</i>	0.186	0.154	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.002	0.021	< 0.001
Negative GAAIS	<i>Spearman's rho</i>	-0.036	0.015	-0.220	-0.265	-0.135	0.072	-0.260
	<i>p</i>	0.590	0.824	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.042	0.280	< 0.001
Level of knowledge about AI	<i>Spearman's rho</i>	0.020	-0.097	0.029	-0.030	-0.010	-0.046	-0.095
	<i>p</i>	0.764	0.146	0.665	0.652	0.886	0.488	0.157
Competencies in the use of AI	<i>Spearman's rho</i>	-0.037	-0.033	-0.216	-0.200	-0.158	-0.011	-0.240
	<i>p</i>	0.584	0.625	0.001	0.003	0.017	0.866	< 0.001

Statements: see Table 1.
Statistically significant associations are shown in bold.
Source: Authors' research

The level of acceptance of Statement 3 was negatively correlated with both the positive and negative GAAIS subscales, as well as with self-assessed competence in the use of AI. This means that the more strongly respondents agreed that using artificial intelligence to complete assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism, the less positive their attitudes towards the benefits of AI, the less understanding their attitudes towards its disadvantages, and the lower their self-assessed competence in using AI. The strength of these correlations was weak.

Similarly, the level of acceptance of Statement 4 showed a negative correlation with both GAAIS subscales and with competence in AI use. In other words, the more strongly respondents agreed that using AI to solve tasks and exams is morally wrong, the less positive their attitudes were towards AI, the weaker their understanding of its drawbacks, and

the lower their self-assessed competence in its use. Again, these correlations were weak.

In the case of Statement 5, a negative correlation was also found with both GAAIS subscales and competence in the use of AI. This suggests that the more strongly respondents agreed with the idea of developing regulations to define the extent to which participants in the educational process may use AI, the less positive their attitudes towards the benefits of AI (weak correlation), the weaker their understanding of its disadvantages (minimal correlation), and the lower their self-assessed competence in using AI (minimal correlation).

The level of acceptance of Statement 6 was positively correlated with the positive GAAIS subscale. This means that the more strongly respondents agreed that students should be prepared for the ethical use of AI in their future professional work, the more positive their attitudes were towards the benefits of AI. However, this correlation was minimal.

Additionally, the level of acceptance of Statement 7 negatively correlated with both GAAIS subscales and with competence in the use of AI. This indicates that the more strongly respondents supported the idea of banning AI tools in educational institutions, the less positive their attitudes were towards AI's benefits (moderate correlation), the weaker their understanding of its disadvantages (weak correlation), and the lower self-assessed competence in using AI (weak correlation).

Discussion

The analysis conducted indicates that students from the pedagogical university generally rate their ethical use of AI positively. A total of 65.04% of respondents claim that they always follow ethical principles. However, it should be noted that one in ten admit they do not. A similar percentage (67.70%) report paying attention to privacy and information security issues when using AI, though nearly one in five students is not interested in them. Slightly more than half (50.45%) believe that using AI to complete assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism,

while only 45.13% agree that using AI-based tools for this purpose is morally wrong.

A closer analysis reveals that among those with a positive self-assessment of their ethical use of AI, just over half (83 out of 147) believe that using AI for exams constitutes plagiarism, and about half (72 out of 147) believe it is morally wrong. For comparison, a study by BestColleges found that more than half (54%) of students believe the use of AI tools during university classes constitutes cheating or plagiarism (Nam, 2023). In contrast, over 70% of participants in a study by Cabała et al. (2023) believe that using ChatGPT in class is ethical. Findings from various studies on the ethical use of AI and the willingness to use AI are not clear (see, e.g., Cuéllar et al., 2022; Cabała et al., 2023; Shao et al., 2024). Some suggest that increased awareness of ethical concerns may reduce willingness to adopt AI, while others find that those who consider AI use ethical are more likely to see it as useful.

Most respondents in our study (72.12%) support the development of a regulatory system that would define how students, pupils, and teachers may use AI in education. Students tend to favor clear, well-structured guidelines (Álvarez-Álvarez & Falcon, 2023). At the same time, a significant majority (69.47%) oppose banning the use of AI in educational institutions. Although students support the development of regulations, those with more positive attitudes toward the benefits of AI and higher competence in its use are more likely to believe that such regulation is unnecessary. Other research has shown that exposure to information about the implementation of AI regulations increases the importance that users attach to various ethical issues and is associated with slower rates of AI adoption (Cuéllar et al., 2022).

Equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in their future professions, in which AI will play a major role, is an essential aspect of education (Herane, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). It is noteworthy that 85.84% of respondents in our study support preparing students for the ethical use of AI-based tools in their future careers. Similarly, American teachers point out the need for at least basic education on the ethical use of AI, with 60% recommending comprehensive instruction

in this area (Hamilton, 2024). Well-designed educational programs have the potential to change both attitudes towards AI and willingness to adopt it (Choi et al., 2024). Although many free online training courses on the use of AI are currently available, also in education, respondents expressed a clear expectation that ethical preparation for AI use should be integrated into formal academic curricula.

Our research shows that students have more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI than the level of understanding of its disadvantages. It is worth noting that the average scores on both the negative and positive GAAIS subscales are statistically significantly lower than those reported in English and Turkish studies using the same tool (Baum & Trzcińska-Król, 2024; Kaya et al., 2022; Schepman & Rodway, 2020, 2023). Correlation analysis revealed that students who have more positive attitudes toward the benefits of AI and a better understanding of its disadvantages are less likely to agree that: using AI for assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism and is morally wrong; regulations should be developed to specify the extent of AI use in education; or that AI tools should be banned in educational institutions. Respondents who support preparing students for the ethical use of AI in their future work also tend to have more positive attitudes towards the benefits of AI.

Students rated both their knowledge and competences in using AI as below neutral, with knowledge rated slightly higher. This may be due to a lack of formal education in this area. Correlation analysis further revealed that individuals who rated their AI-related competences higher were also less likely to agree that: using AI for assignments and exams constitutes cheating or plagiarism and is morally wrong; regulations should be developed specifying the degree of AI use in education; or that AI should be banned from educational institutions. Lucas and colleagues (2024) found a significant positive relationship between AI knowledge, trust in AI, and digital competence, with AI knowledge emerging as a strong and consistent predictor of AI trust. Moreover, their findings suggest that digital competences do not influence attitudes towards AI.

Conclusions

One of the biggest challenges that teachers face today is plagiarism. Students are already turning in AI-generated essays as their own. In response, New York public schools have banned the use of AI-based tools that could facilitate cheating. But are such bans truly a solution to potential problems? Would it not be more effective to supplement study programs with content related to artificial intelligence, to develop digital competences and AI-related skills for use in education, and to prepare students for critical engagement with AI?

Rather than penalizing students for using publicly available tools, educational institutions should establish clear guidelines for the ethical use of AI and begin gradually implementing them in academic practices. It is essential to equip both students and teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to use AI-based technologies effectively and ethically.

Research shows that students have a generally positive attitude towards the implementation of AI tools in education, recognizing their potential in both teaching and learning. However, a concerning trend is that individuals with higher competences in using AI and more positive attitudes toward it often do not see a need to introduce regulations regarding its use in educational institutions. Moreover, they do not necessarily consider the use of AI in assignments or exams as unethical behavior, such as cheating or plagiarism.

In light of these findings, it becomes especially important to appropriately prepare future teachers and specialists to work in educational environments where AI may become an integral component of children's and youth education. A key challenge is the development of academic programs supplemented with content related to the use of AI in education. Maciej Sysło (2022) proposes such solutions at the primary school level and presents a framework for an AI Module that should be included in the curriculum. This solution may become a valuable reference for developers of higher education curricula and policymakers in the field of academic education.

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Selected aspects of Home Literacy Environments and reading motivation versus metacognitive reading strategies of students with and without dyslexia – empirical premises for designing educational support

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Home Literacy Environment, metacognitive reading strategies, global motivation, dyslexia, adolescence

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this study was to identify the factors determining students' choice of reading strategies – both for those with and without dyslexia – and examine how motivation to read mediates the relationship between the Home Literacy Environment (HLE), including both active and passive components and the use of specific reading strategies.

Research methods: The study employed the following tools: the *Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARS)* by K. Mokhtari and C. A. Reichard, the *Motivations for Reading Questionnaire* by A. Wigfield and J. T. Guthrie, and an original HLE Questionnaire developed by the authors. A correlational research design was used. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson's r correlations, and regression analysis using A. Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS and SAS. The sample included 252 students diagnosed with dyslexia and 250 students without dyslexia, all aged 14–15.

Process of argumentation: The article begins with an outline of the theoretical background of the research problem, taking into account the importance of the HLE, motivation, and metacognitive reading strategies in students with and without dyslexia. It then details the methodology, sample characteristics, and tools used. Following a presentation of the findings, the article concludes with a discussion of the results and offers recommendations for educational practice.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study identified links between students' retrospective assessments of their HLE (active and passive components), their overall reading motivation, and their self-reported use of reading strategies (global, support, and problem-solving). The findings indicate the mediating role of global reading motivation in the relationship between HLE and reading strategy use – but only among students with dyslexia.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The results allowed us to outline guidelines for designing educational environments conducive to literacy development, including targeted parent psychoeducation about the importance of HLE in academic achievement and specific goals for remedial and compensatory work with students with dyslexia.

Introduction

The development of reading skills is a complex process determined not only by a child's intellectual and cognitive abilities, but also by motivational and volitional factors, as well as environmental influences. These include both formal instruction in preschool and school settings, and early literacy experiences that take place at home through family interactions and play (Katzir et al., 2018; Segal et al., 2018; Sénéchal, 2006). Moreover, reading development may be influenced by multigenerational learning and collaborative educational partnership between families, schools, and child-focused institutions (Kuracki, 2023; 2024).

Home Literacy Environments (HLE) are of particular importance in the development of children's language skills, which determine their later academic achievement. According to the concept proposed by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), HLE includes both meaning-focused activities (such as shared reading and storytelling) and code-focused activities (such as modeling and direct instruction in reading and writing). This applies to both typically developing children and those considered at risk for dyslexia. Research has shown numerous positive associations between reading and reading-related practices within the HLE and later outcomes, including stronger reading skills, a richer vocabulary, and greater motivation to read and learn (Inoue et al., 2018; Silinskas et al., 2012; Torppa et al., 2022;

Zuilkowski et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research specifically investigating the importance of HLE in the development of metacognitive reading strategies in later stages of education, despite the fact that these strategies are known predictors of reading success and learning outcomes (Keskin, 2013; Li, 2010).

In addition to the distinctions based on meaning and code, HLE should also be considered in terms of two components: active – referring to children's direct engagement in interactions that develop literacy skills – and passive – referring to learning literacy skills through observation and modeling, without active participation (Burgess et al., 2003; Gottfried et al., 2015; van Tonder et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2014). On the one hand, the literature emphasizes that the most significant impact on later academic success comes from HLE factors involving direct interaction between parents and children during joint activities (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Caro, 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011). On the other hand, some studies attribute greater importance to observational learning from more experienced caregivers (e.g., Rashid et al., 2005).

Empirical evidence also shows that active family reading practices translate into increased intrinsic motivation to read (Baker et al., 1997; Silinskas, 2020; Wiescholek et al., 2018), although it is unclear whether this effect is equally strong for students with and without dyslexia. This relationship is especially important given that long-term reading motivation can promote consistent reading habits, support the development of metacognitive skills, and enhance reading comprehension (Torppa et al., 2020; Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997). For students with dyslexia, motivation can also act as an important mediator between exam anxiety and the use of metacognitive reading strategies, including global strategies that involve overall analysis of the text, support strategies such as taking notes while reading, summarizing content, or highlighting important information in the text, and problem-solving strategies aimed at thorough understanding through careful reading or visualization (Kuracki & Dłużniewska, 2023). Although motivation appears to play a meaningful role for all students, it may be particularly important for those with dyslexia, as it helps them activate metacognitive resources that facilitate reading in high-pressure testing situations (Stevens et al., 2019).

Given the limited research on the importance of HLE for the use of metacognitive reading strategies among students with and without specific learning disabilities, as well as the factors influencing this relationship, this study aims to fill these gaps and provide a foundation for designing effective educational support strategies.

Methods

The aim of the study was to identify the factors that influence the choice of reading strategies among students with and without dyslexia, as well as the mediating role of reading motivation in the relationship between the HLE (both active and passive components) and the use of specific reading strategies. The following research questions were developed in line with these objectives:

1. Are there differences in students' retrospective assessments of their own HLE (active and passive components), their overall motivation to read, and their self-reported use of metacognitive reading strategies?
2. Are there relationships between students' retrospective assessments of their own HLE (active and passive components), their level of overall motivation to read, and their self-reported use of metacognitive reading strategies (global, support, and problem-solving strategies), among students with and without dyslexia?
3. Does global reading motivation mediate the relationship between the HLE (active and passive components) and the use of specific metacognitive reading strategies in students with and without dyslexia?

Data

The study sample consisted of 502 students – 252 with dyslexia and 250 without – recruited from randomly selected schools across Poland. The students diagnosed with dyslexia had formal documentation from

psychological and educational counseling centers. The participants were between the ages of 14 and 15 ($M = 14.31$, $SD = 0.44$).

Research tools

Three psychometric instruments were used in this study. The *Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory* (MARSI), developed by K. Mokhtari and C. A. Reichard (2002), was administered in a Polish adaptation prepared by the author of this study to assess students' self-reported use of reading strategies. The tool uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "I never or almost never do this"; 5 = "I always or almost always do this"). In this sample, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the subscales were as follows: Global Reading Strategies – 0.88 (original version – 0.92), Problem-Solving Strategies – 0.86 (original version – 0.79), and Support Reading Strategies – 0.86 (original version – 0.87).

To assess students' motivation to read, the *Motivations for Reading Questionnaire* developed by A. Wigfield and J. T. Guthrie (1995) was used in a Polish adaptation by the author of this study. The questionnaire uses a 4-point Likert scale (1 = "very different from me," 2 = "somewhat different from me," 3 = "somewhat similar to me," 4 = "very similar to me"). While the original version includes 11 subscales with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.43 to 0.80, this study used a revised version based on factor analysis, which consolidated the instrument into eight subscales: Social, Evaluation–Compliance, Curiosity, Competition, Engagement, Avoidance of reading-related tasks, Efficacy, and Recognition. In the current sample, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.91, with subscale values ranging from 0.63 to 0.85. For the purposes of this study, only the composite Global Motivation score was used in the analysis.

The *HLE Questionnaire*, developed by the author, was used to assess students' retrospective evaluations of their Home Literacy Environment. It consists of 14 items divided into two subscales and uses a 4-point Likert scale. Response options ranged from "never – we didn't do it at all" to "we did it often – 4 or more times a week," and from "I disagree" to "I completely

agree.” The HLE active subscale includes 8 items reflecting past experiences of being directly involved in reading and writing activities with caregivers, such as looking at or reading books together, telling stories, playing word games, and writing simple words (e.g., “Together with my parents, I told stories about books I had read”). The HLE passive subscale includes 6 items referring to students’ experiences of having their parents model reading and writing behaviors, as well as estimating the size of the home library (e.g., “My parents read books, textbooks, or newspapers in my presence”). In this study, Cronbach’s alpha values were 0.81 for the HLE active subscale, 0.89 for the HLE passive subscale, and 0.86 for the full HLE scale.

Results

In order to address the first research question, which examined whether there are differences in the levels of HLE active, HLE passive, self-reported use of reading strategies, and Global Motivation for reading between students with and without dyslexia, mean scores for each variable were calculated for both groups and compared using independent samples t-tests. As shown in Table 1, students with dyslexia reported significantly higher evaluations of both the active and passive components of their HLE compared to their peers without dyslexia. It is worth noting that in both groups, the active HLE component received higher ratings than the passive one.

In addition, students with dyslexia scored significantly higher than their non-dyslexic peers in their use of Global Reading Strategies (GLOB) – the most frequently used reading strategies in both groups – as well as in Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB). However, no significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of Global Motivation or the use of Support Reading Strategies (SUP).

Table 1. Differences in mean scores for the study variables

Variable	Students with dyslexia		Students without dyslexia		Student's t-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	p
HLE active	3.24	0.54	3.02	0.68	-4.128	475.136	0.001
HLE passive	2.89	0.79	2.49	0.71	-6.058	492.800	0.001
Global Motivation	83.97	19.261	82.12	24.48	-0.943	475.360	0.346
Global Reading Strategies (GLOB)	40.42	10.39	37.90	11.55	-2.561	500	0.011
Support Reading Strategies (SUP)	24.78	8.38	23.82	8.42	-1.273	500	0.204
Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB)	24.16	5.84	22.37	7.07	-3.097	484.101	0.001

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; p – significance level; bold – statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$); df – degrees of freedom. Analysis conducted using SPSS 29.0.2.0

In order to explore the second research question, which investigated the relationships between HLE active, HLE passive, Global Motivation, and the use of reading strategies (global, support, and problem-solving), Pearson correlation analyses were conducted (see Table 2).

Table 2. Pearson's r correlations between study variables for students with dyslexia (N = 252) and without dyslexia (N = 250)

		1	2	3	4	5
1. HLE active	D					
	WD					
2. HLE passive	D	0.317**				
	WD	0.364**				
3. Global Motivation	D	0.261**	0.148*			
	WD	0.124*	0.028			
4. Global Reading Strategies (GLOB)	D	0.219**	0.210**	0.697**		
	WD	0.017	-0.036	0.642**		
5. Support Reading Strategies (SUP)	D	0.128**	0.170**	0.561**	0.750**	
	WD	0.026	-0.046	0.537**	0.776**	
6. Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB)	D	0.268**	0.173**	0.615**	0.685**	0.717**
	WD	0.076	-0.037	0.543**	0.758**	0.639**

*D – students with dyslexia; WD – students without dyslexia; Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$; Correlation significant at $p < 0.05$
Analysis conducted using SPSS 29.0.2.0*

In both groups, the analysis revealed moderate positive correlations (ranging from 0.54 to 0.69) between Global Motivation and the individual reading strategies (GLOB, SUP, PROB), as well as weak positive correlations (ranging from 0.12 to 0.26) between Global Motivation and both active and passive components of the HLE. Additionally, in both groups, moderate to strong positive correlations (ranging from 0.64 to 0.78) were found among the individual metacognitive reading strategies (GLOB, SUP, PROB), and weak positive correlations (ranging from 0.32 to 0.36) were found between the active and passive components of HLE. The analysis shows that only in the group of students with dyslexia were there weak but statistically significant relationships (ranging from 0.13 to 0.27) between HLE active and individual reading strategies (GLOB, SUP, PROB), as well as similarly weak significant relationships (ranging from 0.17 to 0.21) between HLE passive and the same reading strategies. These findings represent an important step toward answering the question of whether Global Motivation mediates the relationship between specific components of the HLE and students' use of reading strategies.

The correlation analysis provided the foundation for the subsequent regression analysis, which revealed that, among students with dyslexia, both HLE active ($\beta = 0.098$; $p < .005$) and Global Motivation ($\beta = 0.581$; $p < .001$) were significant predictors of the use of Problem Reading Strategies (PROB). Using Hayes' (2013) Model 4 for mediation analysis, it was found that both the model including only HLE active ($F(1, 248) = 19.158$; $p < .001$) and the model including both HLE active and Global Motivation as a mediator ($F(2, 247) = 79.262$; $p < .001$) showed a good fit. These models explained 7% and 39% of the variance in the dependent variable, respectively. This indicates that the model including the mediator more effectively predicts adolescents' use of Problem Reading Strategies (see Table 3). Before introducing the mediator, the direct effect of HLE active on Problem-Solving Strategies was $\beta = 0.268$ ($p < 0.001$). After including the mediator in the model, HLE active remained a significant predictor, but the strength of the relationship decreased to $\beta = 0.115$ ($p = 0.002$), while Global Motivation emerged as a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$). This supports the presence of partial mediation by Global Motivation (Table 4).

Table 3. Statistics showing the percentage of variance explained (R^2) by two models: the first including only the main effect, and the second including the mediating variable

Model	R	R^2	Standard error	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.268	0.072	31.753	19.158	1	248	<0.001
2	0.625	0.391	20.918	79.262	2	247	<0.001

**Predictors in the model: HLE active; **Predictors in the model: HLE active, Global Motivation
Based on SPSS 20.0.2.0 (Model 4, Hayes, 2013)*

Table 4. Unstandardized and standardized coefficients of two regression models: the first including the main predictor, HLE active, and the second including the mediator, Global Motivation

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
	B	Standard Error	β		
1 (Constant) HLE active	14.695	2.191	0.268	6.707	<0.001
	2.916	0.666		4.377	<0.001
2 (Constant) HLE active Global Motivation	5.202	1.964	0.115 0.585	2.649	0.008
	1.251	0.560		2.234	0.002
	0.177	0.015		11.377	<0.001

*Dependent Variable: Problem Reading Strategies (PROB)
Based on SPSS 29.0.2.0 (Model 4, Hayes, 2013)*

The analyses also identified the predictors of students' use of Global Reading Strategies (GLOB). Regression analysis showed that both HLE passive ($\beta = 0.107$; $p = 0.002$) and Global Motivation ($\beta = 0.680$; $p < 0.001$) significantly predict the use of these strategies. Using Model 4 with a mediating variable (Hayes, 2013), it was found that both the model including only the HLE passive variable ($F(1, 248) = 11.387$, $p < 0.001$) and the model including HLE passive and Global Motivation as a mediator ($F(2, 247) = 54.613$, $p < 0.001$) fit the data well. These models explain approximately 4% and nearly 50% of the variance in the dependent variable, respectively, with

the model that includes the mediator providing a significantly better prediction of adolescents’ use of Global Reading Strategies (Table 5).

Before the mediator was introduced, the direct effect of HLE passive on Global Reading Strategies was $\beta = 0.209$ ($p < 0.001$). After the mediator was added to the model, the effect decreased to $\beta = 0.115$ ($p = 0.002$), which indicates partial mediation by Global Motivation ($\beta = 0.681$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 6). It should be emphasized that the strength of the mediating role of Global Motivation was confirmed in all analyzed cases by the standardized indirect effect obtained through the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples.

Table 5. Statistics indicating the percentage of variance explained (R^2) by two models: the first including only the main effect, and the second including the mediator

Model	R	R^2	Standard error	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.209	0.039	103.524	11.387	1	248	<0.001
2	0.705	0.498	54.613	122.343	2	247	<0.001

**Predictors in the model: HLE passive; **Predictors in the model: HLE passive, Global Motivation
Based on SPSS 29.0.2.0 (Model 4, Hayes, 2013)*

Table 6. Unstandardized and standardized coefficients of two regression models: the first including the main predictor, HLE passive, and the second including the mediator, Global Motivation

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
	B	Standard Error	β		
1 (Constant) HLE active	32.487	2.436	0.209	13.336	<0.001
	2.742	0.813		3.375	<0.0012
(Constant) HLE active Global Motivation	5.461	2.531	0.109 0.681	2.158	0.003
	1.425	0.597		2.388	0.001
	0.367	0.025		14.937	<0.001

Dependent Variable: Global Reading Strategies (GLOB). Based on SPSS 29.0.2.0 (Model 4, Hayes, 2013)

Discussion and Conclusions

The analyses conducted in this study indicate that students with dyslexia and those without do not differ in their levels of Global Motivation to read. This suggests that factors other than special educational needs influence both intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation. However, it is not surprising that moderate positive relationships were observed in both groups between Global Motivation to read, the two components of the HLE, and all metacognitive reading strategies. As shown in numerous previous studies (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Caro, 2018; Inoue et al., 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011; Rashid et al., 2005; Torppa et al., 2022), both active engagement of children in early reading experiences and parental modeling of reading and writing behaviors can influence not only the development of interest and attitudes toward reading and learning, but also an understanding of the importance of reading skills for becoming an active participant in social life. Moreover, both components of HLE may contribute significantly to the development of phonological awareness and cognitive functions necessary for decoding, text comprehension, and analyzing content and structure. Regardless of the actual motives for reading, increasing reading practice is an important step toward developing the ability to use a variety of strategies when engaging with printed text.

Significant differences between the two groups were observed in their retrospective assessments of the HLE and in their self-reported use of specific metacognitive reading strategies. The fact that students with dyslexia reported higher ratings for both HLE active and HLE passive components may reflect greater parental involvement in activities that support the development of children's language and reading skills. This could be attributed to the need for early developmental support, as well as to how these parents perceive their parental roles (Kuracki & Dłużniewska, 2023a). It can be assumed that parents of at-risk children invest more effort in their children's development, which manifests in increased early reading activities such as dialogic reading in parent-child dyads and participation in reading-related games. These activities – typically part of joint engagement episodes – are often guided by instructions from teachers and specialists

in kindergartens and early support centers, and they may contribute to cognitive training, paving the way for more frequent use of metacognitive reading strategies among students with dyslexia at later stages of education.

The relationships observed between the HLE and individual reading strategies (GLOB, SUP, PROB) in the group of students with dyslexia also confirmed the findings from the correlation analyses. In future research, however, it would be worthwhile to examine whether, among students without dyslexia, early reading activities initiated by parents differed in their purpose – i.e., whether they were more focused on play rather than intervention.

The results of the regression analysis are noteworthy, as they confirm the partial mediation of Global Motivation in the relationship between HLE active and the self-reported use of Problem Reading Strategies (PROB), as well as in the relationship between HLE passive and Global Reading Strategies (GLOB), in the group of students with dyslexia. While the mediating role of Global Motivation in the relationship between the independent and dependent variables corresponds with theoretical premises previously outlined (Baker et al., 1997; Kuracki & Dłużniewska, 2023; Silinskas, 2020; Wiescholek et al., 2018), it is somewhat surprising that HLE active emerged as a significant predictor only for Problem Reading Strategies (PROB), and HLE passive only for Global Reading Strategies (GLOB).

In the first case, this may be explained by the nature of HLE active, which involves engaging in joint activities with the child – such as dialogic reading, word games, puzzles, or storytelling. These interactions provide many opportunities for children to acquire metacognitive knowledge in practice and to receive feedback from a more experienced partner. As students progress through their education, these early experiences may translate into the use of skills such as reading carefully, adjusting reading speed to text difficulty, maintaining attention, and visualizing content: core elements of Problem Reading Strategies. In the second case, it can be assumed that observing adults engaged in reading and writing various types of materials in many different contexts and situations helps children

develop skills associated with understanding the purpose of reading, identifying the structure of a text, and using visual aids like tables, diagrams, and graphs, i.e., behaviors characteristic of Global Reading Strategies.

The findings of this study provide important insights for designing educational support for at-risk students and those with specific learning difficulties. For children in at-risk groups during early and middle childhood, it appears particularly important to raise parental awareness about the role of the HLE in early literacy development and its impact on later academic achievement. Additionally, efforts should be made to enhance parents' methodological skills in supporting their children's reading development

Psychoeducational efforts targeting parents carried out in both preschool settings and early childhood development centers should aim to increase parents' actual involvement in early literacy activities. This includes the implementation of dialogic reading in the home environment, participation in reading-related games, and consistent modeling of reading and writing behaviors by adult caregivers. Achieving these goals may be most effective through educational partnerships that connect the home, preschools, and other institutions, working together to support children's language and literacy development (Kuracki, 2024). Initiatives implemented through such multilateral collaboration can enhance the appeal of reading activities and, in turn, inspire greater motivation to read and learn among children.

For students with dyslexia in later stages of education, it is essential that corrective and compensatory efforts not only focus on improving individual cognitive functions but also on developing the reading motivation and metacognitive awareness. Strengthening students' ability to reflect on and apply appropriate reading strategies is key. Multi-tiered psychological and educational support structured in this way can more effectively contribute to improving the academic outcomes of students with specific learning difficulties.

Limitations

The results presented here may act as a starting point for more in-depth research, ideally conducted using a longitudinal design. A limitation of the current study is that students' assessments of both HLE components were retrospective, and the use of metacognitive reading strategies was based on self-report. Future research would benefit from a larger and more representative sample to enhance the generalizability of findings.

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Kindergarten teacher preparedness to provide first aid

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): This article presents research into the preparedness of kindergarten teachers to provide first aid. The research was based on statistics regarding accident rates in Polish kindergartens.

Research methods: The study involved 360 kindergarten teachers and employed the diagnostic survey method using a questionnaire.

Process of argumentation: The objective of the study was to assess Polish kindergarten teachers' knowledge of first aid principles. The scope of the research was defined by the following questions:

1. How do the surveyed teachers evaluate their knowledge of first aid?
2. What types of situations involving danger to children have the surveyed teachers encountered?
3. Were the surveyed teachers able to take appropriate action when a child's life or health was at risk?

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study showed that teachers' knowledge of first aid principles is insufficient and that the measures taken did not always follow proper procedures.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: There is a need to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of regularly updating their ability to respond effectively in situations that threaten children's safety.

Keywords:

kindergarten teacher,
first aid, child safety,
child health,
teacher knowledge,
teacher skills

Introduction

Kindergarten is a place where children spend a significant portion of their day, and the teacher is responsible for their safety and well-being. There is always a risk of accidents involving children. Young children are especially prone to minor injuries such as cuts, scrapes, or bruises, and they can fall ill suddenly. The risk of accidents increases particularly during outdoor activities, field trips, or events held outside the preschool setting.

Since teachers are typically the closest adults to children during these times, they are the ones who can respond the fastest in emergency situations. Teachers who are trained in first aid can react effectively to injuries, fractures, burns, fainting, or epileptic seizures. In many cases, quick and appropriate first aid can prevent serious health complications, or even save a child's life. In some situations, especially in more serious cases, immediate action can be crucial. This is all the more important as kindergartens do not employ nurses, so a teacher who knows first aid procedures can administer life-saving care before professional medical services arrive.

The essence of pre-medical first aid

Safety in the preschool environment is essential for the well-being and health of children, teachers, and staff. Accidents, injuries, or medical emergencies are events that cannot be predicted and, therefore, cannot always be prevented. In a kindergarten setting, an accident is defined as "a sudden event caused by an external factor, resulting in injury or death, which occurred during educational, instructional, or caregiving activities either on or off kindergarten premises, such as during a field trip or outing under teacher supervision" (Act on Procurement, October 30, 2002).

An injury is defined as "damage to human tissues or organs caused by an external factor" (Act on Insurance, October 30, 2002). A sudden health risk is defined as "a condition presenting with the abrupt or rapidly approaching onset of symptoms that may lead to serious harm to body

functions, injury, or loss of life, requiring immediate emergency medical care and treatment” (Act of September 8, 2006).

Providing a safe educational environment is critical to minimizing the risk of accidents, injuries, and health-related emergencies. Kindergarten safety is influenced by the following aspects:

- Infrastructure: The building, playground, classrooms, and other areas must be properly maintained and secured against potential hazards.
- Training: Teachers and other staff should be trained in first aid, emergency procedures, and response to medical incidents. This ensures they can act quickly and effectively in the event of accidents or emergencies.
- Health awareness: Teachers and staff should be aware of any children with health issues, such as allergies, asthma, or chronic illnesses so they can respond appropriately in a crisis.

All of these factors contribute to maintaining a safe and supportive preschool environment. Knowledge, preparation, and appropriate training of staff are key to ensuring a high level of safety and well-being during all educational activities. For this reason, it is vital that teachers are familiar with the rules of first aid, as this has a direct impact on the safety of children. The European Resuscitation Council defines first aid as “the helping behaviors and initial care provided for an acute illness or injury.” First aid can be administered by anyone, in any setting (Zideman et al., 2015).

The kindergarten principal is responsible for guaranteeing safe and hygienic conditions both on-site and during activities outside the facility (Regulation of the Minister, 2002, §2). The principal is also responsible for equipping all kindergarten rooms with first aid kits containing the necessary supplies and clear instructions on handling medical emergencies (Regulation of the Minister, 2002, §20). It is important to note that in the event of an accident, legal responsibility for the child lies with the kindergarten and its governing authority. Without a doubt, teachers are expected to provide continuous supervision and care of children. If an

accident occurs during their class, they must be able to demonstrate that appropriate safety measures and due care were taken. Therefore, teachers should regularly refresh their first aid training to stay up-to-date with best practices and updated procedures.

In accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport, all kindergarten teachers are required to undergo first aid training (Regulation of the Minister, 2002, §21). According to the law, first aid training does not have an expiration date and is only required to be completed once. However, from a practical point of view, it is beneficial to repeat the training periodically so that teachers retain their knowledge. The 2021 Resuscitation Guidelines indicate that first aid skills in non-healthcare professionals tend to decline within 3 to 12 months after the initial training. For this reason, refresher courses are recommended after that time frame.

Scientific evidence shows that more frequent refresher training improves rescue skills, boosts the confidence of first responders, and increases their willingness to act. As a result, teachers' knowledge remains current and is less likely to be forgotten. Understanding the principles of first aid helps teachers feel more confident and respond more effectively in emergency situations. It allows them to stay calm and make the right decisions, which is especially important when young children experience medical issues (Resuscitation Guidelines 2021). Teachers do not always work alone; they often collaborate with other school staff, such as administrative personnel, assistant teachers, and custodians. With first aid training, teachers can effectively support the entire team in the event of a medical emergency before professional help arrives. Moreover, parents are more likely to trust a kindergarten whose staff is properly trained in first aid. Knowing that their children are cared for by people who are prepared for potential health emergencies gives parents peace of mind when leaving their children at kindergarten.

The most common risks in preschool children

It should be noted that accidents involving children in kindergartens unfortunately occur quite frequently. Data from the Ministry of Education and Science show that during the 2021/2022 school year, 644 accidents were reported in Polish kindergartens, including five classified as serious. Table 1 presents the accident statistics for Polish kindergartens.

Table 1. Accident rate in kindergartens

Item	Causes of accidents	No.	%
1.	Lack of or inadequate supervision of the child	2	0.3
2.	Unintentional action by another person	68	10.6
3.	Unintentional action by the child	92	14.3
4.	Intentional action by another person	5	0.8
5.	Intentional action by the child	3	0.5
6.	Child's inattention	348	54.0
7.	Improper use of playground equipment	1	0.2
8.	Unintentional collision or strike	25	3.9
9.	Poor technical condition of facilities	2	0.3
10.	Other causes	98	15.1
11.	Total	644	100
Item	Location of accident	No.	%
1.	Kindergarten room	248	38.5
2.	Playground	279	43.3
3.	Gym	12	1.7
4	Canteen	1	0.2
5.	Sports ground	16	2.5
6.	Circulation areas/Corridors	20	3.1
7.	Public assembly area	1	0.2
8.	Sports facilities	1	0.2
9.	Street	9	1.4
10.	Other	57	8.9
11.	Total	644	100

Item	Type of activity during accident	No.	%
1.	Didactic activities	182	28.3
2.	Free play	10	1.5
3.	Implementation of an educational project	1	0.2
4.	Physical education	9	1.4
5.	Art classes	2	0.3
6.	Sports competition	2	0.3
7.	Educational trips	10	1.5
8.	Other activities	428	66.5
9.	Total	644	100

Source: Author's research

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that situations posing a threat to a child's safety can occur at any time and in any place. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the actions to take when such an event occurs. The outcome for a child in a life-threatening condition often depends on the first person who comes to their rescue and provides first aid. Waiting for an ambulance without taking any action exposes the child to complications that may affect them for the rest of their life.

The most common sudden health risks in preschool children include loss of consciousness, altered awareness, seizures, sudden sharp chest pain, heart rhythm disturbances, increased dyspnea, sudden sharp abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, acute and severe allergic reactions, bites or stings from venomous animals, poisoning with medications, chemicals or gases, hypothermia, falls from significant heights, nosebleeds, choking, injuries to the musculoskeletal system (fractures, sprains and dislocations), head injuries, foreign objects in the eye, wounds caused by mechanical trauma, chemical substances or external conditions (e.g. high temperature), burns – most commonly from hot liquids or chemicals – chemical burns of the esophagus caused by accidental ingestion of toxic substances found in cleaning products, chemical burns to the eyes, electric shock, and hyperthermia caused either by external factors such as sunlight, saunas or hot baths, or internal factors such as impaired heat regulation (Kleszczyński, 2018; Kołodziejcki, 2004; Kopta, 2016; Pogorzelszyk et al., 2020).

Methodological foundations of research

The aim of the study was to determine the knowledge of Polish kindergarten teachers about the principles of first aid. The scope of the study was determined by the following problems:

1. How do the surveyed teachers assess their knowledge of first aid?
2. What child hazard situations have the surveyed teachers encountered?
3. Were the surveyed teachers able to take appropriate action in a situation where the child's life or health was threatened?

In searching for answers to the questions included in the problems, it was theoretically assumed that:

1. The surveyed teachers positively assess their knowledge of first aid.
2. The surveyed teachers encounter various situations requiring first aid.
3. The surveyed teachers are able to take appropriate actions in situations of a threat to a child's life or health.

In order to address the research questions, a diagnostic survey method was employed, which used an original questionnaire developed by the author. The survey consisted of a personal information section and 15 closed-ended questions, each followed by open-ended questions for more detailed responses. The study included 360 kindergarten teachers from the Siedlce commune, with 94.4% (340 individuals) identifying as women and 5.6% (20 individuals) as men. The age distribution of the respondents is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Age distribution of surveyed teachers

No.	Age	Number of teachers	
		N	%
1.	Under 25	80	22.2
2.	25-35	140	38.9
3.	36-45	100	27.8
4.	46-55	30	8.3
5.	Over 55	10	2.8
6.	Total	360	100

The data in Table 2 indicate that the majority of surveyed teachers were between the ages of 25–35 (38.9%) and 36–45 (27.8%). The teachers surveyed had varying lengths of service, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Length of service of surveyed teachers

No.	Length of service	Number of teachers	
		N	%
1.	Less than a year	60	16.7
2.	1 –3 years	50	13.9
3.	4 –5 years	30	8.3
4.	6 –8 years	80	22.2
5.	9 –10 years	40	11.1
6.	11 –15 years	60	16.7
7.	Over 15 years	40	11.1
8.	Total	360	100

The data in Table 3 show that the largest groups of respondents had 6–8 years of experience (22%) and less than one year or 11–15 years of experience (16.7% each). The smallest group consisted of teachers with 4–5 years of experience (8.3%).

Analysis of the results

To begin with, the surveyed teachers were asked what first aid is. A total of 89% of respondents (320 people) answered this question. Their responses can be grouped into four main categories:

1. Actions aimed at saving lives – 39.1% (125 people)
2. Activities focused on protecting health – 30.9% (99 people)
3. Providing assistance and initial care – 21.9% (70 people)
4. Calling for qualified help – 8.1% (26 people)

Next, the respondents were asked whether knowledge of first aid is an important skill for a kindergarten teacher. 71.9% (259 people) answered yes, 6.1% (22 people) answered no, and 22.0% (79 people) had no opinion on the matter. Teachers who stated that knowledge of first aid is an important skill for a kindergarten teacher most often gave the following reasons:

- A teacher's responsibilities include care, education, and teaching; children must be safe in the kindergarten.
- The teacher must ensure that children are well cared for and safe.
- The teacher is responsible for the children; if something happens, the teacher is held accountable.
- Children are very active, and accidents often happen; the teacher must know how to respond.
- It is the teacher's duty to care for the child.
- Because human life is the highest value.
- You can save someone's life.

Respondents who answered negatively explained that they had never encountered a situation in their professional career in which they needed to provide first aid. Therefore, they did not believe that such a skill is important in a teacher's work. Following this, the teachers were asked whether they had participated in first aid training. 88.9% of respondents

(320 people) said yes, while 11.1% (40 people) said they had not taken part in such training. Among those who had, the amount of time since their last training varied (see Table 4).

Table 4. Time elapsed since first aid training

No.	Participation in the training	Number of teachers	
		N	%
1.	This year	50	15.6
2.	A year ago	30	9.4
3.	2-3 years ago	60	18.7
4.	4-6 years ago	80	25
5.	7-10 years ago	30	9.4
6.	Over 10 years ago	70	21.9
7.	Total	320	100

The data presented in Table 4 shows that the largest group, 25% of respondents, had completed first aid training 4–6 years ago. The second largest group, 22%, were teachers who had received such training more than 10 years ago. Slightly fewer respondents, 19%, had completed first aid training 2–3 years ago, while 16% had done so in the current year. The smallest proportion of teachers had undergone training either one year ago or 7–10 years ago – 9% in each case.

Most respondents participated in first aid training at kindergartens – 71.9% (230 people) – followed by those who received training at university – 15.6% (50 people) and those who attended courses they enrolled in on their own initiative – 12.5% (40 people). None of the surveyed teachers had undergone retraining.

The next step was to gather information on how the teachers assessed their own level of first aid knowledge (see Table 5).

Table 5. Self-assessment of first aid knowledge among surveyed teachers

No.	Level of expertise	Number of teachers	
		N	%
1.	Very good	0	0
2.	Good	20	5.6
3.	Average	130	36.1
4.	Weak	160	44.4
5.	Lack of knowledge	50	13.9
6.	Total	360	100

The data presented in Table 5 shows that the majority of respondents assessed their level of knowledge of first aid principles as poor (44.4%) or average (36.1%). Additionally, 13.9% of respondents believed they had no knowledge of first aid at all. Only 5.6% rated their knowledge in this area as good. Teachers were also asked whether they would like to improve their first aid knowledge. A total of 53.1% (191 people) answered yes, while 46.9% (169 people) had no opinion on the matter. Those who answered affirmatively gave the following reasons:

- Reducing fear of making a mistake – 47.1% (90 people)
- A desire to learn how to save lives – 31.9% (61 people)
- A sense of responsibility for children’s safety – 21.0% (40 people)

Further questions in the survey concerned the topic of Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs). Only 21.9% of respondents (79 people) knew what an AED is, what it is used for, and when it should not be used. The remaining 78.1% (281 people) had no knowledge about it. When asked whether there was a defibrillator in their kindergarten, only 11.1% (40 people) answered yes, 13.9% (50 people) said that there was no such device, and as many as 75.0% (270 people) did not know whether an AED was present in their facility.

In the next stage of the study, teachers were asked whether they had ever encountered a child health emergency during their professional work.

63.1% of respondents (227 people) answered yes, while 36.9% (133 people) said they had not. Teachers who had encountered a child health emergency were then asked to describe the situation (see Table 6).

Table 6. Child health emergency situations encountered by surveyed teachers

No.	Type of emergency situation	Number of teachers	
		N	%
1.	Sudden cardiac arrest (SCA)	9	4.0
2.	Nosebleeds	84	37.0
3.	Choking	75	33.0
4.	Foreign object in the eye	70	30.8
5.	Seizures	14	6.2
6.	Cuts	152	67.0
7.	Limb injuries	50	22.0

Note: Teachers could report more than one type of situation; percentages do not total 100%.

The data presented in Table 6 shows that the most common child health emergency that teachers encountered in their work was a cut (67.0%). Significantly fewer reported dealing with nosebleeds (37.0%), choking (33.0%), foreign objects in the eye (30.8%), and limb injuries (22.0%). The least frequently reported incidents were seizures (6.2%) and sudden cardiac arrest (4.0%). The percentages do not total 100% because many teachers mentioned more than one type of emergency situation. As a follow-up, teachers were asked how they responded to these situations.

In cases of sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) and loss of consciousness, 8 teachers correctly initiated life-saving procedures. One teacher provided the following detailed response:

“I assessed the safety, checked the child’s consciousness and breathing, and asked my colleague to call an ambulance. I started cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), 30 compressions, 2 breaths for 1 minute,

and assessed breathing. CPR continued until the child was taken over by the doctor.”

This procedure follows the standard CPR protocol for adults. However, for children under 7, the most common cause of SCA is hypoxia, and a ratio of 15 compressions to 2 breaths is generally more effective. Still, using adult CPR protocol on a young child was not a serious mistake, as life-saving action was taken promptly.

In cases of nosebleeds, the majority of teachers, 90.5% (76 people), correctly followed the recommended procedure by tilting the child's head forward so that the blood could flow out without entering the stomach. However, 9.5% (8 people) made errors by tilting the child's head back, applying a cold compress to the neck, or pinching the nose. Tilting the head back is incorrect because it can cause blood to drain into the throat and stomach, which can lead to vomiting and worsening of the child's condition.

Another emergency situation indicated by teachers was airway obstruction caused by a foreign body. In all reported cases, the child choked on food. Only 25.3% of teachers (19 people) responded correctly by allowing the child to clear the airway on their own. In contrast, 74.7% (56 people) reacted immediately by striking the interscapular area without first checking whether the child's cough was effective. This response is inappropriate because it may startle the child and cause them to inhale forcefully, potentially pushing the object deeper into the airway, which can worsen the situation. 31% of teachers (70 people) reported encountering a foreign object in a child's eye. Only 18.6% of them (13 people) were able to properly clean the eye. However, as many as 81.4% (57 people) were unable to perform the appropriate first aid measures. Their actions involved mechanically removing the object from the eye, which is a mistake.

Seizures were another type of emergency experienced by the surveyed teachers. In one case, the seizure was triggered by an allergic reaction to a bee sting; in the other cases, the children had been diagnosed with epilepsy. Unfortunately, all of the responses described by the teachers were inappropriate. While they removed nearby objects that could

pose a danger to the child and held the child's head, they also made the mistake of placing a crayon in the child's mouth to prevent tongue biting. They did not attempt to stop the seizure itself. After the seizure ended, they placed the child in the recovery position and called the parents.

The most common child emergency situation reported by teachers was cuts (67%, 152 people). These included superficial abrasions, scratches, a broken eyebrow arch, and head wounds without neurological symptoms. In all of these cases, the first aid procedures were performed correctly, with no serious errors that could have worsened the child's condition. The procedures involved washing the wound with soap and water or hydrogen peroxide and covering it with a Band-Aid. The final type of emergency situation involved limb injuries, such as contusions, sprains, fractures, and dislocations. First aid in these cases was relatively rare. Most teachers informed the parents about the incident and, with their consent, called an ambulance. Only 5 teachers, that is 10% of those who encountered such cases, immobilized the injured limb with a bandage and sling in the event of a dislocation.

Discussion

The presented research study is part of a broader trend in examining teacher education. A review of the relevant literature shows that there are relatively few publications that explore teachers' knowledge of first aid. Most available studies focus on primary and secondary school teachers (Kosydar & Mach-Lichota, 2008; Tokarski & Wojciechowska, 2008; Bilewicz-Wyrozumska, Rybarczyk, Lar, Złotkowska, Kucybała, Zbrojkiewicz, Bilewicz-Stebel, Mroczek, & Ziółko, 2014; Sowizdraniuk & Lesiewicz-Misiurnała, 2018; Wiśniewski & Majewski, 2007). However, no similar studies have been found that target specifically kindergarten teachers.

Similarly, in the international literature, there is a lack of research on kindergarten teachers' knowledge of first aid, despite widespread recognition of the importance of such skills. Much of the available research focuses instead on school nurses, who are often seen as key actors in

emergency care, chronic condition management, and meeting students' daily healthcare needs (Elgie, Sapien, Fullerton, & Moore, 2010; Elgie, Sapien, & Fullerton-Gleason, 2005; Pappas, 2011; Ugalde, Guffey, Minard, Giardino, & Johnson, 2018).

These studies predominantly investigate the readiness of school nurses to respond quickly and effectively to threats to children's health or life, particularly in cases of sudden cardiac arrest and the use of automated external defibrillators (AEDs). They also examine readiness to handle emergencies involving children with special healthcare needs who require oxygen, tracheotomies, or ventilators, as well as the ability to manage head injuries and safely transfer students to emergency departments when a concussion is suspected (Evans & Ficca, 2012; Porter, Page, & Somppi, 2013; Olympia, 2017). Additional research has concentrated on the preparedness of school nurses to respond to potential mass emergencies and disasters, such as tornadoes, explosions, shootings, and earthquakes (Grant, 2002; Burke, Goodhue, Berg, Spears, Barnes, & Upperman, 2015; Olympia, Wan, & Avner, 2005). The readiness of school nurses to respond to pediatric emergencies, especially in meeting the health needs of children with asthma, has been emphasized by researchers such as Hillemeier, Gusic, and Bai (2006), Sapien (2007), and Olympia (2016).

Similarly, the key role of school nurses in caring for students with food allergies, which pose a serious risk of anaphylactic shock, has been highlighted by Powers, Bergren, and Finnegan (2007); Rhim and McMorris (2001); Robinson and Ficca (2012); and Behrmann (2010). An analysis of the existing literature reveals a lack of publications or research on teachers' – and especially kindergarten teachers' – knowledge of first aid in emergency situations, which often occur unexpectedly in early childhood facilities. In such cases, the teacher is usually the closest adult to the child in need and should be the first to initiate life-saving measures. This is an urgent issue in education with potentially serious implications for children's safety.

The absence of clear requirements for teachers' first aid competencies may point to gaps in legal regulations or educational standards. Admittedly, many publications address the general principles of first aid,

but few focus specifically on the skills and responsibilities of teachers. This lack of emphasis contributes to a general unawareness and a failure to prioritize first aid education in the teaching profession. Moreover, the lack of relevant research and publications may hinder teachers' understanding of the importance of first aid training. Dedicated studies on teachers' first aid competencies could serve as valuable references for educational institutions and teacher training programs. Expanding research and publication in this area would benefit both preschool teachers and the children in their care.

It is important that kindergarten teachers possess not only theoretical knowledge but also practical first aid skills in order to fully protect and support the children that they are responsible for. As the findings of this study indicate, current levels of knowledge and preparedness are insufficient.

Conclusion

Kindergarten is an environment where a variety of situations can occur, some of which may require pre-medical assistance. The physical setting of the kindergarten, i.e., its building, equipment, and the way classes are organized can contribute to risks to children's health and safety through accidents and injuries. Additionally, children's psychophysical traits, such as high activity levels, curiosity, and a desire for new experiences are risk factors that may lead to situations in which first aid is necessary. The social environment, including peer interactions, such as tendencies toward aggression or fighting, is also of considerable importance. For these reasons, knowledge of basic first aid principles is essential.

Professional first aid skills can help save lives and protect health. The research conducted for this study indicates that kindergarten teachers' knowledge of first aid principles is inadequate, even though 89% of the surveyed teachers had completed some form of first aid training. Most of these courses took place on the premises of the kindergarten. However, none of the teachers rated their knowledge as very good. The study also

found that none of the teachers had received refresher training, despite the European Resuscitation Council's recommendation that such training should be repeated 3 to 6 months after the initial course.

The findings show a significant need for first aid education among kindergarten teachers. This is a skill set that must be continuously developed to ensure that teachers can respond effectively in emergency situations and maintain a safe environment for children. Not only is this important for the safety of the children, but it also contributes to a sense of trust and calm in the kindergarten setting. Therefore, it is vital that educational authorities require kindergarten teachers to regularly update and improve their first aid knowledge and skills.

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Adaptation and validation of the school climate measure among Polish-speaking adolescents

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The main objective of the present study was to assess the performance of a Polish adaptation of the School Climate Measure (SCM) among a sample of Polish adolescents (N = 451).

Research methods: Reliability analyses, confirmatory factor analysis, sex and cultural measurement invariance analyses, as well as convergent and discriminant validity analyses were performed using the adapted 10-domain version of the SCM.

Keywords:

school climate,
scale development,
self-report,
psychometric tool,
adolescents

Process of argumentation: The School Climate Measure (SCM; Zullig et al., 2015) was developed to assess middle and high school students' subjective perceptions of their school climate.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The 10-factor model demonstrated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(774) = 1428.73$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .052, 95% CI [.048, .056], CFI = .944, TLI = .938, SRMR = .053. We also achieved strict sex measurement invariance, allowing for valid comparisons between male and female students in Poland. However, comparisons with American samples should be made with caution, as only weak factorial cultural invariance was confirmed. Reliability indices for all scales were satisfactory: Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .81$, Tarkkonen's $\rho \geq .71$, McDonald's $\omega \geq .81$. The Polish version of the SCM demonstrated good convergent validity with students' average grades and good discriminant validity, as evidenced by a lack of correlation between subscale scores and the time taken to complete the survey. The SCM can help identify challenges in Polish schools and support efforts to promote a positive school climate that promotes students' holistic development and well-being.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The Polish adaptation of the SCM is recommended for use with Polish adolescents for both research and practical applications.

Introduction

1. School climate

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, an individual's development is influenced by proximal and distal environments. One of the most significant contexts for adolescents is the school environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), which affects young people on multiple levels: socially and personally. Each educational institution has its own distinctive atmosphere, shaped by its values, characteristics, and interpersonal relationships. This atmosphere is often described using concepts such as cohesion, "friction," competition among students, and the overall sense of satisfaction within the class (Loukas et al., 2006).

Zullig et al. (2014) define school climate as a subjective student experience. It is associated with feelings of safety and the overall experience of school life. School climate encompasses all the norms, goals, and values that prevail in a school (Cohen et al., 2009; Zullig et al., 2014).

Cohen et al. (2009) emphasize that school climate goes beyond the individual student's experience. It pertains to the community involved in youth development, its functioning, and the shared understanding of life within a social group. The quality of students' lives at school is a subject of growing interest to researchers and practitioners alike, as it is correlated with significant issues such as the risk of aggression or depression among students (Clark et al., 2022). Additionally, it is linked to students' mental well-being, emotional problems, and behavior (Loukas et al., 2006).

2. School climate measures

Methods used to assess school climate typically rely on self-report measures. One such tool is the Delaware School Climate Survey (Bear et al., 2011), which includes five subscales that evaluate various aspects of students' school experiences, such as relationships with teachers, peer interactions, adherence to school rules, overall affinity for the school, and feelings of safety.

In another study conducted by McGuire and colleagues (2010), school climate was examined by asking students about their relationships with teachers and their sense of safety on the school premises. Similarly, the School Climate Inventory developed by Brand et al. (2003) addresses elements like safety, teacher support, peer relationships, and school regulations. However, this inventory expands upon earlier models by incorporating additional scales that measure factors such as school support for diversity, student involvement in school decision-making, and the school's level of innovation.

Among these tools, the School Climate Measure (SCM) developed by Zullig et al. (2014) was selected for its comprehensive portrayal of school climate and its robust, consistently replicated psychometric properties among both middle and high school students. In this context, school climate refers to students' subjective experiences, particularly their sense of safety and overall perception of school life.

The SCM comprises 10 domains:

- Positive Student–Teacher Relationships assesses the extent to which teachers show interest in students’ concerns, invest time, offer help, and demonstrate empathy.
- Order and Discipline gauges students’ perception of the fair and consistent application of school rules.
- Opportunities for Positive Student Engagement measures perceptions of equal opportunities for success.
- Physical Environment evaluates the school’s cleanliness and overall orderliness.
- Academic Support assesses the clarity of academic expectations, understanding of homework, and whether equal expectations are applied to all students.
- Parental Involvement examines the communication between parents and teachers, parental participation in school activities, and involvement in curriculum discussions.
- School Connectedness assesses students’ enthusiasm for and interest in attending school.
- Perceived Exclusion/Privilege gauges students’ awareness of fairness and adherence to school regulations.
- Social Environment assesses students’ satisfaction with peer relationships.
- Academic Satisfaction with Learning measures students’ contentment with tests and homework assignments (Zullig et al., 2014).

3. School Climate Model

Teachers who are able to create a positive classroom climate, characterized by the cultivation of positive relationships, tend to strengthen students’ sense of competence and their desire to learn (Sointu, Savolainen, Lappalainen, & Lambert, 2017). Moreover, the more positively students perceive the school climate, the more their academic achievement improves (Reyes et al., 2012). The domains of the School Climate Measure (SCM) are correlated with factors such as school satisfaction (Zullig et al., 2011), academic achievement (Daily et al., 2019), and students’ overall quality of life (Zullig et al., 2018).

In the Polish literature, there is a lack of measurement tools specifically addressing the concept of school climate. Therefore, this study reports on the adaptation and preliminary psychometric evaluation of the 10-domain version of the SCM in a sample of Polish adolescents. Among the many tools for measuring school climate discussed in the literature, we chose the SCM due to its numerous advantages. A comprehensive, systematic, and evaluative review of 37 selected school climate measures found that the SCM is highly rated (González, Bacon, & Kearney, 2023). Zullig, Matthews-Ewald, and Huebner (2021) noted that the SCM is a psychometrically sound tool for measuring school climate and is available free of charge.

Other advantages of the SCM include its ease of use, accessibility, broad domain coverage, and multidimensional structure. A unidimensional total school climate score can be computed by combining all domain items. At the same time, separate scores can be calculated for each of the 10 domains, which function independently in the assessment of school climate. The SCM provides a holistic view of students' perceptions of the school environment. Raw scores, and especially the profile of domain scores, can be useful in designing programs that promote a positive school atmosphere.

The original version of the School Climate Measure (SCM) was developed by Zullig, Koopman, Patton, and Ubbes in 2010 through a systematic process. Initial steps involved reviewing existing self-report tools for assessing school climate. The resulting questionnaire included 39 items measuring eight domains: 1) Positive Student-Teacher Relationships, 2) School Connectedness, 3) Academic Support, 4) Order and Discipline, 5) School Physical Environment, 6) School Social Environment, 7) Perceived Exclusion/Privilege, and 8) Academic Satisfaction. Items were rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" (Zullig, Matthews-Ewald, & Huebner, 2021).

Subsequently, five studies were conducted to evaluate the psychometric properties of the SCM. The first study included 2,049 middle and high school students from public schools and employed both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on a randomly divided sample. These analyses confirmed the eight-factor structure of the measure (Zullig et al., 2010).

The second study (Zullig et al., 2014) replicated the scale's structure and examined its correlations with safety-related variables in the context of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and with students' average grade point average (GPA). Notably, strong relationships were found between academic support and a range of safety-related factors, as well as between positive perceptions of school climate and a sense of safety.

In the third study (Zullig et al., 2015), the original eight domains were expanded to ten with the addition of Student Engagement and Parental Involvement. The rationale for adding the Student Engagement domain was based on Audas and Willms' (2001) definition of engagement as the extent to which students believe they can freely and equally participate in academic and non-academic activities without feeling excluded due to their differences. Factor analysis confirmed the presence of ten distinct factors, and several original SCM items were removed in favor of items representing the newly developed domains, increasing the total number of items from 39 to 42.

The fourth study (Daily et al., 2018) evaluated the psychometric properties of the SCM among junior high school students. Confirmatory factor analysis validated all ten factors, and reliability analyses indicated that students with higher academic achievement and school satisfaction perceived the school climate more positively. The fifth study focused on establishing the convergent and discriminant validity of the SCM. As expected, the SCM showed significant correlations with measures of school satisfaction, overall life satisfaction, and health-related quality of life. Notably, the strongest correlations were observed with measures of adolescent school satisfaction (Zullig, Ward, Huebner, & Daily, 2018).

Method

Polish translation of the SCM

The original SCM (Zullig et al., 2015) was translated into Polish in accordance with guidelines for the cultural adaptation of psychological tests (Hornowska & Paluchowski, 2004). First, two research assistants proficient

in both English and Polish independently translated the scale into Polish. The Research Team found the translations to be highly similar. Minor discrepancies were discussed and resolved to produce a final version, which was then verified through back-translation.

The Polish version of the SCM retained the structure of the original, consisting of ten factors or subscales: Positive Student–Teacher Relationships, School Connectedness, Academic Support, Order and Discipline, School Physical Environment, School Social Environment, Perceived Exclusion/Privilege, Academic Satisfaction, Parental Involvement, and Opportunities for Student Engagement (see Table 1).

Table 1. The School Climate Measure

Factors of the School Climate Measure	No. of items	Example item
1. Positive Student-Teacher Relationships (PSTR)	8	<i>Teachers understand my problems.</i>
2. School Connectedness (SC)	4	<i>My schoolwork is exciting</i>
3. Academic Support (ASu)	4	<i>I believe that teachers expect all students to learn.</i>
4. Order and Discipline (OD)	6	<i>School rules are enforced consistently and fairly.</i>
5. School Physical Environment (SPE)	4	<i>My school is neat and clean.</i>
6. School Social Environment (SSE)	2	<i>I am happy with the kinds of students who go to my school.</i>
7. Perceived Exclusion/Privilege (PEP)	3	<i>At my school, the same students get chosen every time to take part in after-school or special activities.</i>
8. Academic Satisfaction (ASa)	2	<i>I am happy about the amount of homework I have.</i>
9. Parental Involvement (PI)	3	<i>My parents are involved in school activities.</i>
10. Opportunities for Student Engagement (OSE)	6	<i>Students "different" in any way are treated with respect.</i>

Participants

The sample consisted of 451 respondents (with no missing data). The participants were students from Polish schools (52% female), aged between 14 and 16 years. Of the respondents, 54% lived in cities, 23% in towns, and 24% in rural areas. A total of 97% of students assessed their health as at least good. Sixty percent reported being satisfied with life,

while 30% reported being somewhat satisfied. On average, students reported spending 2.42 hours per day ($SD = 0.65$) on learning. Regarding parental education, higher education was reported for 42% of mothers and 36% of fathers, and a university degree for 46% of mothers and 35% of fathers. Most parents were actively employed (84% of mothers, 93% of fathers).

Procedure

The responses were collected using an online survey. Participation in the study was voluntary and unpaid. The research was funded by university grant number 1/6-20-19-05-2-0200.

Data Analysis

A variety of psychometric analyses were performed to confirm the structure of the measure. These included item-item correlation analysis using Pearson's r ; reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha, Tarkkonen's rho, and McDonald's omega; Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA); measurement invariance (MI) analyses; and validity analyses.

All statistical analyses were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2022) and RStudio (RStudio Team, 2022). The following R packages were used (listed alphabetically): corrplot (Wei & Simko, 2021), dplyr (Wickham et al., 2022b), haven (Wickham et al., 2022a), Hmisc (Harrell & Dupont, 2022), lavaan (Rosseel, 2012), mvnTest (Pya et al., 2016), PerformanceAnalytics (Peterson et al., 2020), psych (Revelle, 2022), RColorBrewer (Neuwirth, 2022), and semTools (Jorgensen et al., 2022). The dataset and all corresponding scripts, including the analyses presented in the results section, are publicly available in the following repository:

https://osf.io/anvww/?view_only=4a54213e86d04c55b62ca871ae02eb00

Initially, we calculated the correlation coefficients among the subscales included in the SCM, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation matrix between SCM subscales

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. PSTR	-								
2. SC	.84**	-							
3. ASu	.65**	.62**	-						
4. OD	.79**	.78**	.73**	-					
5. SPE	.44**	.43**	.60**	.56**	-				
6. SSE	.51**	.51**	.56**	.61**	.58**	-			
7. PEP	-.18**	-.17**	-.08	-.09	.03	-.13**	-		
8. ASa	.61**	.64**	.48**	.55**	.28**	.43**	-.29**	-	
9. PI	.55**	.55**	.35**	.49**	.30**	.35**	-.33**	.54**	-
10. OSE	.75**	.74**	.71**	.82**	.64**	.65**	-.04	.56**	.49**

Note. PSTR = Positive Student–Teacher Relationships; SC = School Connectedness; ASu = Academic Support;
OD = Order and Discipline; SPE = School Physical Environment; SSE = School Social Environment;
PEP = Perceived Exclusion/Privilege; ASa = Academic Satisfaction; PI = Parental Involvement;
OSE = Opportunities for Student Engagement
*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

During the second stage, we conducted psychometric assessments of the reliability of each scale within the SCM. The reliability indices used for this evaluation were Cronbach’s alpha (Cronbach, 1951), Tarkkonens rho (Vehkalathi et al., 2006), and the Omega total coefficient (McDonald, 1999). In addition, we examined the overall reliability of the entire measure, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability indices for the SCM subscales

Subscale	α 95% CI [LB, UB]	Tarkkonen's rho (ρ)	McDonald's omega (ω)
Positive Student-Teacher Relationships (PSTR)	.95 [.94, .96]	.91	.95
School Connectedness (SC)	.92 [.90, .93]	.86	.92
Academic Support (ASu)	.85 [.83, .87]	.73	.85
Order and Discipline (OD)	.93 [.92, .94]	.89	.94
School Physical Environment (SPE)	.94 [.93, .95]	.91	.95
School Social Environment (SSE)	.85 [.82, .88]	.73	.85
Perceived Exclusion/Privilege (PEP)	.81 [.78, .84]	.71	.81
Opportunities for Student Engagement (OSE)	.93 [.91, .94]	.87	.93
Academic Satisfaction (ASa)	.90 [.88, .91]	.80	.90
Parental Involvement (PI)	.82 [.78, .84]	.75	.83

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient; CI = confidence interval; LB = lower bound; UB = upper bound.
The 95% confidence interval bounds were estimated based on the Duhachek criterion.

The reliability analysis was guided by predefined goodness-of-fit criteria: Cronbach's alpha was set at $> .80$ (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), Tarkkonen's rho at $> .71$ (Laakasuo et al., 2022), and McDonald's omega at $> .70$ (Hair et al., 2014). The reliability values for all scales met the specified thresholds, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .81 to .95, Tarkkonen's rho from .71 to .91, and McDonald's omega from .81 to .95, indicating satisfactory reliability across the board.

In the next phase, we rigorously assessed the congruence of our model with the observed data using classical Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The selection of an appropriate estimator was contingent upon the evaluation of the multivariate normality assumption. To test this assumption, we applied the Henze–Zirkler Test for Multivariate Normality (Henze & Zirkler, 1990) and the Mardia Test for Skewness and Kurtosis (Mardia, 1970). Since both tests indicated violations of the normality assumption ($p < .001$), we employed the Maximum Likelihood with Robust Standard Errors (MLR) estimator, which is recommended for non-normally distributed data (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).

The model fit was assessed using several established fit indices: the chi-square test and its ratio to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Acceptable model fit was defined as: $\chi^2/\text{df} < 3$ (Kline, 2023); CFI and TLI $\geq .90$ (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999); RMSEA and SRMR $< .08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023). Indicators of good model fit were: $\chi^2/\text{df} < 2$ (Kline, 2023), CFI $\geq .95$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Rutkowski & Svetina, 2014), and RMSEA and SRMR $< .05$.

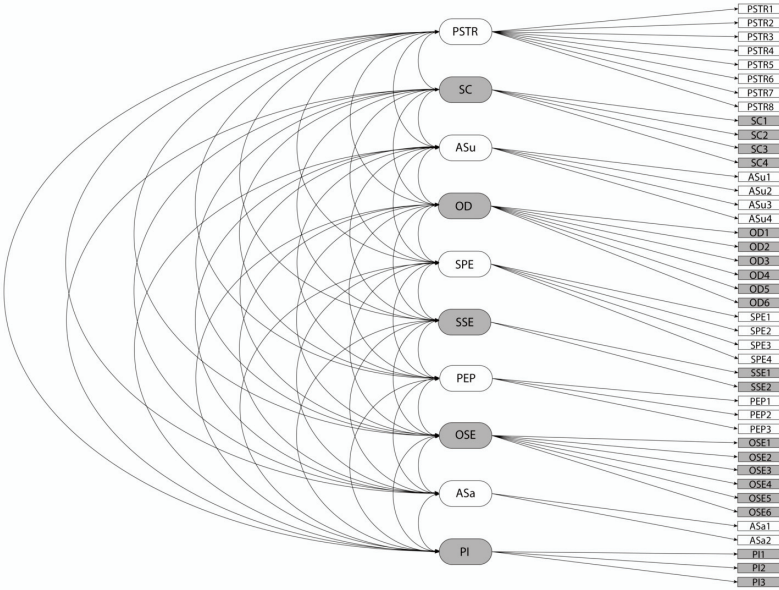
All model fit indices were reported using robust estimations. Convergence was achieved after 122 iterations. The fit indices showed acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(774) = 1428.73$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.85$; RMSEA = .052, 95% CI [.048, .056]; CFI = .944; TLI = .938; SRMR = .053. Additionally, the standard errors for SCM item factor loadings were within acceptable limits (see Table 4).

Table 4. Standardized factor loadings for the 10-factor model of the SCM

SCM Items	SCM Factors	
	Loading	SE
Positive Student-Teacher Relationships (PSTR)		
PSTR 1	.81	.05
PSTR 2	.77	.05
PSTR 3	.82	.06
PSTR 4	.85	.05
PSTR 5	.85	.05
PSTR 6	.87	.05
PSTR 7	.90	.04
PSTR 8	.88	.04
School Connectedness (SC)		
SC 1	.83	.04
SC 2	.85	.05
SC 3	.91	.04
SC 4	.84	.05

SCM Items	SCM Factors	
	Loading	SE
Academic Support (ASu)		
ASu 1	.73	.06
ASu 2	.79	.08
ASu 3	.77	.08
ASu 4	.79	.07
Order and Discipline (OD)		
OD 1	.79	.05
OD 2	.83	.04
OD 3	.89	.05
OD 4	.88	.04
OD 5	.74	.05
OD 6	.90	.04
School Physical Environment (SPE)		
SPE 1	.84	.04
SPE 2	.92	.06
SPE 3	.90	.06
SPE 4	.95	.06
School Social Environment (SSE)		
SSE 1	.89	.07
SSE 2	.84	.07
Perceived Exclusion/Privilege (PEP)		
PEP 1	.70	.09
PEP 2	.86	.13
PEP 3	.75	.13
Opportunities for Student Engagement (OSE)		
OSE 1	.80	.05
OSE 2	.84	.05
OSE 3	.88	.06
OSE 4	.88	.06
OSE 5	.78	.07
OSE 6	.75	.07

SCM Items	SCM Factors	
	Loading	SE
Academic Satisfaction (ASa)		
ASa 1	.92	.04
ASa 2	.88	.04
Parental Involvement (PI)		
PI 1	.66	.08
PI 2	.83	.13
PI 3	.86	.13



Note. PSTR = Positive Student–Teacher Relationships; SC = School Connectedness; ASu = Academic Support;
OD = Order and Discipline; SPE = School Physical Environment; SSE = School Social Environment;
PEP = Perceived Exclusion/Privilege; ASa = Academic Satisfaction; PI = Parental Involvement;
OSE = Opportunities for Student Engagement

For the sex measurement invariance analysis, we selected male and female participants from the Polish sample. For the cultural measurement invariance analysis, we used both our dataset (Polish sample) and

a dataset provided by Prof. Zullig (American sample), one of the authors of the method, corresponding to the research findings presented in Zullig et al. (2015).

We assessed the fit of each step in the measurement invariance procedure (configural, metric, scalar, and strict) using the chi-square test and several fit indices: CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. However, since the chi-square statistic is known to be sensitive to minor deviations from the model, which may not be practically meaningful (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016; Rutkowski & Svetina, 2014), fit indices are considered more appropriate for evaluating model fit in measurement invariance analyses (Rutkowski & Svetina, 2014).

At each step of the measurement invariance analysis, we defined acceptable model fit according to the following thresholds: CFI and TLI $\geq .90$ (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999), and RMSEA and SRMR $< .08$ (Brown, 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023).

To test for metric, scalar, and strict invariance, we used ΔCFI , $\Delta RMSEA$, and $\Delta SRMR$ cutoff values. Due to the small size of the male and female groups ($N < 300$) and the unequal sizes of the Polish and U.S. samples, we followed the recommendations of Chen (2007) for small or unequal group sizes:

- For metric invariance: $\Delta CFI \leq .005$, $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$, and $\Delta SRMR \leq .025$
- For scalar and strict invariance: $\Delta CFI \leq .005$, $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$, and $\Delta SRMR \leq .005$

Our approach assumed that meeting at least two out of the three criteria (ΔCFI , $\Delta RMSEA$, $\Delta SRMR$) was essential for establishing measurement invariance at each stage of the analysis. In the analysis of sex measurement invariance, we first conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for the 10-factor model separately for men and women to validate model fit within each subgroup of the Polish sample. We then performed a standard measurement invariance analysis on the full Polish sample, beginning with the configural invariance stage.

The 10-factor model demonstrated acceptable fit for both the male and female groups, meeting the criteria of CFI and TLI $\geq .90$ and

RMSEA and SRMR $\leq .08$ (refer to Table 5). In the subsequent analysis of sex measurement invariance, the configural, metric, scalar, and strict models also satisfied the criteria for acceptable fit (CFI and TLI $\geq .90$; RMSEA and SRMR $\leq .08$). For the metric assessment, all cutoff criteria were successfully met: $\Delta CFI \leq .005$, $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$, and $\Delta SRMR \leq .025$. At the scalar and strict levels of sex measurement invariance, all cutoff criteria were again met: $\Delta CFI \leq .005$, $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$, and $\Delta SRMR \leq .005$. Based on these evaluations, we confirmed strict sex measurement invariance. This suggests that the residual variances of observed scores not attributed to the latent factors are consistent across male and female groups.

Cultural measurement invariance analyses were conducted using the U.S. and Polish samples (see Table 6). The U.S. sample data were sourced from Zullig et al. (2015), where detailed findings are reported. The 10-factor model showed acceptable fit in both the U.S. and Polish groups, meeting the criteria of CFI and TLI $\geq .90$ and RMSEA and SRMR $\leq .08$. In the analysis of cultural measurement invariance between the U.S. and Polish groups, only the configural, metric, and scalar models reached acceptable fit according to the specified criteria (CFI and TLI $\geq .90$; RMSEA and SRMR $\leq .08$). For the metric assessment, all three cutoff criteria were met: $\Delta CFI \leq .005$, $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$, and $\Delta SRMR \leq .025$. At the scalar level, only one of the three criteria was satisfied: $\Delta RMSEA \leq .01$. We refrained from interpreting the strict level of invariance due to the model not meeting acceptable fit criteria (i.e., CFI and TLI $< .90$) and because the scalar level itself did not meet the required thresholds.

However, considering the overall model fit and the cutoff criteria, we confirmed metric cultural measurement invariance between the U.S. and Polish groups. This indicates that the 10-factor model demonstrates weak equivalence in terms of factor loadings between the cultural groups being compared.

Table 5. Psychometric indicators for sex measurement invariance analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Pr ($>\chi^2$)	$\Delta RMSEA$	ΔCFI	$\Delta SRMR$	Decision
Male	1222.6	8	774	1.58	<.001	.061	.922	.913	.059							-
Female	1348.0	6	774	1.74	<.001	.064	.923	.914	.059							-
(1) Config.	2572.44	1548	1.66	<.001	.062	.922	.913	.059								-
(2) Metric	2592.98	1580	1.64	<.001	.061	.923	.916	.061	(1) - (2)	18.87	32	.968	-.001	.001	.002	Accept
(3) Scalar	2641.97	1612	1.64	<.001	.061	.922	.917	.061	(2) - (3)	47.84	32	.036	0	-.001	0	Accept
(4) Strict	2661.64	1654	1.61	<.001	.060	.923	.920	.061	(3) - (4)	37.86	42	.653	-.001	.001	0	Accept

Estimator: MLR. Note. Config. = configural; $\Delta\chi^2$, Δdf , $Pr(>\chi^2)$, $\Delta RMSEA$, ΔCFI , and $\Delta SRMR$ denote the change in the chi-square value, degrees of freedom, the significance of these changes, and changes in RMSEA, CFI, and SRMR, respectively.

Table 6. Psychometric indicators for culture measurement invariance analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Pr ($>\chi^2$)	$\Delta RMSEA$	ΔCFI	$\Delta SRMR$	Decision
Poland	1428.7	3	774	1.85	<.00	1	.052	.944	.938	.053						-
USA	1656.2	1	774	2.14	<.00	1	.033	.954	.948	.036						-
(1) Config.	3068.23	1548	1.98	<.001	.039	.950	.944	.040								-
(2) Metric	3235.38	1580	2.05	<.001	.040	.945	.940	.044	(1) - (2)	177.35	32	<.001	.001	-.004	.004	Accept
(3) Scalar	4198.24	1612	2.60	<.001	.050	.915	.909	.053	(2) - (3)	1059.3	32	<.001	.009	-.031	.010	Reject
(4) Strict	6443.73	1654	3.90	<.001	.067	.840	.833	.057	(3) - (4)	1483	42	<.001	.017	-.075	.003	Reject

Estimator: MLR. Note. Config. = configural; $\Delta\chi^2$, Δdf , $Pr(>\chi^2)$, $\Delta RMSEA$, ΔCFI , and $\Delta SRMR$ denote the change in the chi-square value, degrees of freedom, the significance of these changes, and the changes in RMSEA, CFI, and SRMR, respectively.

In the final step of the analysis, we attempted to validate the SCM by examining convergent validity using students' average grades from the last semester prior to study participation and discriminant validity using the time taken to complete the online survey (refer to Table 7).

Table 7. Correlation matrix for the convergent (average grades) and discriminant (survey finish time) validity of the SCM

Variable	SCM subscales									
	PSTR	SC	ASu	OD	SPE	SSE	PEP	ASa	PI	OSE
Average grades	.26**	.29**	.26**	.23**	.18**	.18**	.18**	.24**	.24**	.16**
Survey finish time	-.001	-.03	-.01	-.03	.02	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.01	-.02

Note. PSTR = Positive Student–Teacher Relationships; SC = School Connectedness; ASu = Academic Support;
OD = Order and Discipline; SPE = School Physical Environment; SSE = School Social Environment;
PEP = Perceived Exclusion/Privilege; ASa = Academic Satisfaction; PI = Parental Involvement;
OSE = Opportunities for Student Engagement
*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

For all SCM scales, significant positive correlations were observed with students' average grades. The strength of these associations predominantly ranged from low to moderate ($r = .16-.30$). Scores on all SCM scales showed no correlation with survey finish time.

In essence, these findings support the conclusion that the Polish adaptation of the SCM demonstrates reasonably strong convergent construct validity, evidenced by the positive correlations between SCM scale scores and students' average grades from the last semester before study participation. Additionally, the SCM exhibits discriminant validity, as indicated by the consistently non-significant correlation coefficients between SCM subscale scores and the time needed to complete the online survey.

General Discussion

The present article scrutinizes the adaptation and validation of the School Climate Measure (Zullig et al., 2015) in a sample of Polish students, with a broader discussion of the context, methodology, findings, implications, and limitations of the study.

The Polish educational landscape is undergoing transformation and facing complex challenges (Buchcic & Grodzińska-Jurczak, 2004; Jakubowski, 2021; Ocetkiewicz et al., 2017). The school environment occupies a central place in students' lives, significantly influencing their academic experiences and overall development. Particularly during adolescence, school becomes the primary setting for knowledge acquisition and personal growth. Understanding the nuanced factors that contribute to a positive school climate and stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning is a critical endeavor that has thus far received limited attention in Polish educational research.

Polish education is marked by a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The educational system has evolved significantly over the years, adapting to social, economic, and cultural changes (Buchcic & Grodzińska-Jurczak, 2004; Jakubowski, 2021; Ocetkiewicz et al., 2017). These adaptations have often necessitated closer examination of the school climate, given its profound influence on students' academic performance, mental well-being, and future prospects (Gwiazdowska-Stańczak, 2021a, 2021b).

To address the lack of tools in the Polish educational context for comprehensively assessing school climate, we undertook the adaptation of the School Climate Measure (SCM). Drawing inspiration from the American original, our research proceeded through several rigorous stages. First, we conducted reliability analyses for each of the ten scales that comprise the measure. This involved calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients to assess internal consistency. These analyses provided a solid foundation for evaluating the reliability of the adapted instrument.

Next, we performed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using the Maximum Likelihood with Robust Standard Errors estimator (MLR), as

the data did not meet the assumptions of multivariate normality (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). The goodness-of-fit criteria supported the suitability of the original 10-factor model for capturing the multifaceted nature of school climate among Polish students.

We also recognized the importance of examining measurement invariance across both sex (female and male students in Poland) and cultural context (Poland vs. the United States). The original 10-factor SCM model demonstrated strict measurement invariance between Polish female and male students. However, cultural measurement invariance between Polish and American students was found to be weak. These differences in psychometric equivalence may result from contextual differences between the educational systems in the two countries, with the Polish system being comparatively less stable.

The results of the invariance analyses suggest that mean comparisons between Polish male and female students on the SCM's latent factors are valid. However, comparisons between Polish and American students should be made with caution. Unequal sample sizes and differing educational contexts may limit the interpretability of cross-cultural comparisons. While metric invariance was supported, the absence of scalar and strict invariance restricts the extent to which cross-cultural comparisons can be meaningfully interpreted. Therefore, any conclusions about cultural differences should be drawn carefully and with full awareness of these limitations.

The final stage of assessing the quality of the Polish SCM adaptation involved evaluating its construct validity through both convergent and discriminant validity analyses. As expected, the SCM scales correlated positively with students' average grades from the last semester before participation and showed no correlation with the time required to complete the online survey. These findings confirm the robust convergent and discriminant validity of the Polish adaptation, respectively, evidencing its high methodological integrity.

While our research yielded promising results, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. First, although our sample size was substantial, a larger sample would have strengthened the generalizability

of our findings. Additionally, the process of translating survey items from the original language into Polish introduces the possibility that subtle linguistic nuances may have influenced how respondents interpreted the items.

The adapted SCM, designed specifically for the Polish educational context, emerges as a valuable tool for understanding the complex dynamics of the school environment. Its usefulness extends beyond academic research into practical applications. For educators and school psychologists, this adapted instrument provides a means to gain deeper insight into students' school-related experiences. It can serve as a diagnostic tool for identifying specific areas of concern within the school climate, thereby enabling targeted interventions to enhance students' overall well-being.

In terms of future research directions, there is a wealth of unexplored terrain. Subsequent studies could delve into the intricate relationship between school climate and academic achievement. Additionally, investigations into the effects of school climate on students' psychological well-being, socio-emotional development, and long-term life outcomes are warranted.

In conclusion, the adaptation and validation of the School Climate Measure for the Polish context represent a significant contribution to the field of educational psychology. This adapted instrument is not only recommended for scientific research in Poland, but also holds substantial promise for practical applications in education. By identifying and addressing school-related challenges, it helps create a more supportive and effective learning environment – ultimately promoting students' holistic development and well-being, which in turn has the potential to shape the future of our society.

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Exploring the experiences of department heads in promoting positive work ethics among educators

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): Poor work ethics among educators in disadvantaged schools remain a persistent challenge, undermining teacher performance, learner outcomes, and institutional effectiveness. Despite their pivotal role in enforcing professional standards, little is known about how department heads experience and navigate their responsibilities in promoting ethical workplace behaviour. This study explores the experiences of department heads in promoting positive work ethics among educators in disadvantaged schools. The study aims to examine how department heads lead efforts to promote positive work ethics and to understand the challenges they face in doing so.

Research methods: The research adopts a constructivist paradigm, using a qualitative approach to gather insights into the lived experiences of 20 department heads with at least five years of leadership experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Process of argumentation: Through the voices of department heads, the study develops an understanding of how ethical leadership is enacted in challenging school environments. The argument is built around the actions department heads take – such as role modeling, monitoring, and fostering development – and how these actions are

Keywords:

collaboration,
department head,
educators, effective
communication,
leadership, monitoring
and evaluation,
work ethics

constrained by contextual limitations, such as limited resources, political interference, and lack of incentives.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The findings reveal that department heads play a crucial role in addressing ethical challenges by fostering a culture of accountability, communication, and professional development. They set a positive example through role modeling, monitor educators' performance, and create opportunities for growth and collaboration. The study also highlights significant barriers, such as inadequate rewards, school politics, and scarce resources that affect morale and educator effectiveness. These insights contribute to educational sciences by deepening the understanding of leadership practices in ethically challenging environments.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Addressing the identified challenges requires systemic reforms, including the implementation of transparent reward systems, the promotion of collaboration, and the reduction of workplace politics. By addressing these issues, department heads can better foster a positive work ethic, enhance teacher performance, and support improved learner outcomes in disadvantaged school contexts.

Introduction

Work ethic broadly refers to an individual's character and approach to responsibilities in both personal and professional settings. It encompasses the values, principles, and behaviors that shape one's attitude toward work (Prabhu, 2021). Work ethics can be categorized as either positive or negative. A positive work ethic reflects diligence, reliability, initiative, and continuous self-improvement (Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020). Key indicators include dependable attendance, low absenteeism, high performance, loyalty, and commitment to an institution (Fesenmyer, 2023; Zhenjing et al., 2022). In educational settings, a strong work ethic fosters teamwork, collaboration, higher employee engagement, improved school reputation, and better academic standards (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Zhenjing et al., 2022). Educators who exhibit professionalism and responsibility contribute to the overall effectiveness of an institution (Narain, 2015; Nkabinde, 2012).

Conversely, a negative work ethic is marked by behaviors that undermine productivity, accountability, and professionalism (Prabhu, 2021). In schools, educators with poor work ethics may arrive late, deliver

substandard instruction, neglect administrative duties, or show disinterest in professional development (Debeş, 2021; Jacob, 2022; Zakaria, 2021). These behaviors negatively impact both educators and learners, leading to low staff morale, poor teamwork, declining academic performance, and damage to the institution's reputation (Furnham, 2021). Studies suggest that leadership inefficiencies, lack of accountability, ineffective delegation, and the absence of incentive programs contribute to declining ethical standards in schools (Fesenmyer, 2023). Additionally, Kaptein (2023) highlights how unethical workplace cultures can lead to poor institutional performance, legal risks, and limited opportunities for growth.

In this context, department heads play a pivotal role in shaping work culture and promoting ethical conduct among educators. As academic administrators, they oversee curriculum implementation, monitor teacher performance, manage student progress, and ensure policy compliance (Tapala et al., 2022). Beyond administrative duties, they serve as mentors, role models, and enforcers of professional standards, fostering discipline and accountability within their departments (Kalane & Ram-buda, 2022).

Despite their critical role, limited research explores how department heads experience and navigate their responsibilities in fostering positive work ethics among educators. Most studies focus on teachers' professional conduct, institutional policies, and general leadership influence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Furnham, 2021). However, there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences, challenges, and strategies employed by department heads to promote ethical workplace behavior in schools. Given their dual role as both leaders and intermediaries between school management and teachers, department heads' perspectives are essential for shaping ethical leadership practices.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of department heads in promoting positive work ethics among educators.

Objectives of the study

1. To generate a deeper theoretical understanding of how department heads lead the process of promoting a positive work ethic among educators in public primary schools.
2. To identify and analyze the practical challenges that department heads encounter in promoting a positive work ethic among educators, with the goal of informing contextually relevant leadership practices and support mechanisms.

Methodology

This study fits within the constructivist paradigm, which attempts to understand department heads' experiences in managing learner discipline through parental involvement (Mertens, 2005). A qualitative research approach was chosen, as it offers interpretive approaches geared towards examining phenomena in their natural contexts (Creswell, 2012). The research design employed was a generic qualitative approach, focused on uncovering and comprehending phenomena, processes, or participant perspectives relevant to the study.

Using purposeful sampling, participants were deliberately selected to best address the research objectives (Klenke, 2016). Twenty department heads from both primary and secondary (high) schools – each with a minimum of five years' experience in departmental leadership – were selected from various provinces across South Africa. Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim after each session. Transcripts were then read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Data were analyzed using Creswell's (2012) guidelines for qualitative content analysis, which included coding, categorization, and the development of themes. Thematic analysis highlighted barriers identified by participants. The thematic presentation and discussion of the data were guided by the research aim and informed by existing literature.

Findings

Approaches used by department heads to promote a positive work ethic among teachers

Effective communication

Participants indicated that effective communication is crucial for department heads to lead and promote a positive work ethic among educators. Some participants shared the following insights:

“I implemented effective communication by conducting department meetings on a regular basis... I communicate with educators through multiple platforms. I clearly articulate the department’s goals and expectations for work ethic and performance. I also ensure that all educators understand the standards and policies related to work ethics.”

“I encourage open communication where educators feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions. I maintain respect during conversations. I also keep the team informed about departmental changes, achievements, and areas needing improvement. I allow for open discussion.”

“I listen attentively to educators’ feedback and concerns, showing that their opinions are valued, and I address their concerns and feedback promptly and constructively.”

“I address conflicts or issues quickly and fairly and facilitate discussions to resolve issues amicably and maintain a positive atmosphere.”

“Effective communication has led educators in my department to take ownership and responsibility for their duties and has improved their overall work ethic.”

The data draw attention to the pivotal role of effective communication in promoting a positive work ethic among educators, as emphasized by the participants. Department heads who regularly engage in clear and open communication set the tone for high standards and expectations within their teams. By conducting frequent meetings, using multiple communication platforms, and clearly articulating departmental goals, leaders

can ensure that educators understand their responsibilities and the standards of work ethic expected of them.

Moreover, fostering an environment where educators feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns – and where feedback is promptly and constructively addressed – not only enhances trust but also encourages educators to take ownership of their duties. In support of this approach, Huda (2022) indicates that effective communication practices are associated with higher job satisfaction and greater professional commitment among educators. Additionally, effective communication is linked to improved conflict resolution and a more positive work atmosphere, which further reinforces a culture of accountability and professionalism (Janiah et al., 2023). Thus, the implementation of effective communication strategies by department heads is crucial for enhancing educators' work ethic and overall departmental performance.

Monitoring and evaluation

Participants indicated that department heads can use monitoring and evaluation to promote a positive work ethic among educators. The following excerpts highlight participants' experiences with how monitoring and evaluation have been applied in their respective departments:

"To maintain positive work ethics among teachers in my department, I conduct regular classroom observations and informal walk-throughs to gather data on their (educators) teaching practices, punctuality, and engagement."

"I carry out performance tracking by maintaining records of attendance, participation in meetings, professional development activities, and contributions to departmental initiatives."

"I implement feedback systems, such as surveys and suggestion boxes, to understand educators' perspectives and identify areas for improvement regarding their work ethics."

"I conduct periodic performance reviews to provide educators with feedback on their work ethic and professional conduct."

“I work with educators to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals related to improving work ethic and professional behavior.”

“Based on the outcome of the monitoring and evaluation, I recognize and celebrate educators who consistently demonstrate a positive work ethic through awards, public acknowledgments, and other forms of recognition. I also develop incentive programs that reward educators for meeting or exceeding expectations related to work ethics and professional behavior.”

“These monitoring and evaluation practices have led to some educators having a positive work ethic in my department.”

The data illustrate how department heads effectively use monitoring and evaluation to foster a positive work ethic among educators. By conducting regular classroom observations, informal walk-throughs, and performance tracking, department heads gather critical information on educators’ teaching practices, punctuality, and engagement. These efforts are reinforced by feedback systems, such as surveys and suggestion boxes, which allow educators to share their perspectives and identify areas for improvement.

The collected data are analyzed to identify trends, strengths, and areas in need of development. This analysis forms the basis for periodic performance reviews and the setting of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals for improving work ethic. A study by Schildkamp et al. (2023) highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation in educational leadership, as these practices not only provide actionable insights but also foster accountability and continuous improvement.

Moreover, recognizing and rewarding educators who demonstrate a positive work ethic – through awards, public acknowledgment, and incentive programs – further reinforces these behaviors and encourages others to follow suit. According to Robinson and Harris (2022), this type of recognition boosts morale and promotes a culture of excellence and professionalism within the department. Consequently, the strategic use

of monitoring and evaluation by department heads is instrumental in enhancing educators' work ethic, leading to improved departmental performance and a more positive educational environment.

Role modeling

Participants reported that role modeling is a key strategy that department heads use to promote a positive work ethic among educators by demonstrating the behaviors and attitudes they wish to see in their teams. The participants say:

"As a departmental head, I consistently demonstrate exemplary work habits that I want the educators in my department to exhibit. It is vital for me to lead by example by possessing a positive work ethic, as it would be hypocritical to desire that educators in my department possess a positive work ethic if I am displaying a negative work ethic. Educators in my department are more willing to take suggestions for improving work ethic, knowing that I, as the department head, am also conducting myself accordingly. These habits include punctuality, preparedness, and dedication. By being the first to arrive and the last to leave, I set a standard for commitment."

"I demonstrate a commitment to excellence and high-quality work by displaying a passion for teaching and learning by showing excitement and enthusiasm in the classroom and meetings. ... producing well-prepared and thoughtful lesson plans, assessments, and reports to serve as a model for other teachers in my department."

"I actively participate in professional development opportunities and encourage teachers in my department to do the same, which has fostered a culture of continuous improvement in our department."

"Owing to the fact that I want teachers in my department to demonstrate accountability and responsibility as part of their ethical behaviour, I, as the department head, take responsibility for both my successes and failures and admit my mistakes."

"I provide guidance and support to new and less experienced teachers, which builds their confidence and competence. I believe that regular

check-ins and offering constructive advice foster a culture of mentorship that could facilitate a positive work ethic amongst educators.”

The data emphasize the crucial role of role modeling by department heads in promoting a positive work ethic among educators. Participants reported that when leaders consistently demonstrate the behaviors and attitudes they expect from their teams – such as punctuality, preparedness, dedication, and ethical decision-making – it sets a powerful example that encourages educators to follow suit. This approach aligns with leadership theories that highlight the impact of leading by example on team dynamics and performance.

According to Kouzes and Posner (2023), role modeling is one of the most effective leadership strategies, as it establishes standards for others to emulate and fosters a culture of integrity and commitment. By arriving early, preparing thoroughly, maintaining high ethical standards, and actively participating in professional development, department heads not only set expectations but also inspire educators to adopt similar practices. Furthermore, by taking responsibility for their actions and providing mentorship and support, leaders reinforce a culture of accountability and continuous improvement within their departments. This approach not only improves work ethic but also builds a cohesive and motivated team, as supported by recent studies that underscore the importance of ethical leadership in enhancing organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Serang et al., 2022). Therefore, role modeling by department heads is instrumental in cultivating a positive work ethic and fostering a professional and supportive educational environment.

Providing opportunities for growth

Department heads play a crucial role in fostering a positive work ethic among educators by providing opportunities for growth. According to participants, several strategies they employed include:

“I organize and facilitate regular workshops and training sessions on pedagogical strategies, classroom management, and the use of new

educational technologies. I encourage and support teachers in pursuing advanced certifications and specialized training. I invite experts to share insights and innovative practices.”

“In my department, I form professional learning communities to allow teachers to collaborate on solving common challenges and sharing best practices. I usually arrange for peer observations where teachers can learn from each other’s strengths and strategies. Also, I established mentorship programs pairing experienced teachers with newer staff to provide guidance and support.”

“I encourage teachers to take on leadership roles in school committees or task forces. At times, I assign teachers to lead special projects, such as curriculum development or school events. I do rotate departmental roles and responsibilities to give teachers varied leadership experiences. I involve teachers in decision-making processes, making them feel valued and invested in the school’s success.”

“I recognize and celebrate teachers’ achievements and efforts publicly in staff meetings and school communications. I provide incentives for professional growth, such as additional professional development funds, awards, or stipends. I ensure teachers in my department have access to necessary resources that will enhance their positive work ethics, such as teaching materials, technology, and support staff. I allocate time within the school schedule for teachers to plan together and share resources.”

“I work with teachers to set personal professional goals and create development plans that will help them to exhibit positive work ethics. I encourage reflective practices amongst the teachers in my department, such as journaling or peer discussions, to help teachers self-assess and plan for improvement regarding their positive work ethics.”

“By implementing these strategies, we can promote a positive work ethic and create an environment where educators are motivated to grow professionally, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.”

The data highlight the significant role of department heads in fostering a positive work ethic among educators by providing ample opportunities for professional growth. Participants emphasized strategies

such as organizing workshops, facilitating professional learning communities, and encouraging advanced certifications to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and classroom management. This approach aligns with contemporary educational leadership literature, which underscores the importance of continuous professional development in improving teaching effectiveness and work ethic (Abakah, 2023).

By creating opportunities for peer observations, mentorship programs, and leadership roles, department heads empower educators to learn from one another and develop leadership skills, thereby fostering a collaborative and supportive work environment. Additionally, involving educators in decision-making processes and recognizing their achievements publicly boosts their morale and strengthens their investment in the school's success, as supported by research on teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Ryan et al., 2022). Providing necessary resources and dedicated time for collaboration further reinforces a culture of professional growth and a positive work ethic. By implementing these strategies, department heads not only promote individual teacher development but also enhance the overall educational environment, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both educators and students.

Challenges in promoting a positive work ethic amongst educators **Lack of rewards**

The data show that a lack of rewards and incentives can pose significant challenges in promoting a positive work ethic among educators. Participants highlighted several ways this issue can manifest:

"When educators' efforts and achievements are not acknowledged, it can lead to feelings of being undervalued and unappreciated. Without tangible rewards or incentives, there is little motivation for educators to invest additional time and effort into their work, which can lead to minimal compliance rather than enthusiastic engagement."

"Constant high demands without rewards can lead to burnout. Teachers who feel overworked and underappreciated are more likely to experience stress and exhaustion, leading to increased absenteeism and attrition."

“A lack of incentives can contribute to low morale among staff. When educators feel that their hard work is not rewarded, it can create a negative atmosphere. Without incentives, teachers may be less inclined to collaborate and share resources, as they might not see any personal or professional benefit from doing so.”

“Educators may be less willing to try new teaching methods or technologies if they do not see any reward for taking risks or stepping out of their comfort zones.”

“When rewards and incentives are absent or inconsistently applied, it can lead to perceptions of inequity and favoritism, causing resentment among staff. Trust in leadership can be undermined if educators feel that their hard work is not fairly rewarded. This can result in a lack of trust in the administration and its initiatives.”

The data underline the critical importance of rewards and incentives in fostering a positive work ethic among educators, with their absence posing significant challenges. When educators’ efforts go unacknowledged, they may feel undervalued and unappreciated, which diminishes motivation and engagement. This aligns with Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory, which identifies recognition as a key factor in job satisfaction and motivation.

Without tangible incentives, educators may meet only the minimum requirements rather than striving for excellence, which leads to a culture of compliance rather than enthusiasm. The lack of rewards can also contribute to burnout; constant high demands without corresponding recognition increase stress and exhaustion, resulting in higher absenteeism and turnover rates (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). Moreover, the absence of incentives can create a negative atmosphere, reducing collaboration and innovation, as educators may become reluctant to share resources or adopt new teaching methods when no benefits are perceived.

Inconsistently applied rewards can further exacerbate these issues by fostering perceptions of inequity and favoritism, eroding trust in leadership. Research indicates that when educators feel their hard work is not fairly rewarded, it undermines their trust in administrative initiatives,

ultimately weakening the overall work ethic within the educational environment. Thus, the strategic use of rewards and incentives is essential in promoting a motivated, collaborative, and innovative teaching staff.

When rewards are applied inconsistently, perceptions of inequity and favoritism can arise, further eroding trust in leadership. Research indicates that when educators feel their hard work is not fairly acknowledged, it undermines their trust in administrative initiatives and weakens the overall work ethic within the school environment (Cherkowski et al., 2025). Therefore, the strategic use of rewards and incentives is essential in promoting a motivated, collaborative, and innovative teaching staff.

School politics

Research participants were aware that politics in schools can present several challenges to promoting a positive work ethic among educators. According to participants, school politics can affect work ethic among educators in the following ways:

“When promotions, assignments, or resources are distributed based on personal connections or favoritism rather than merit, perceived or real biases in how teachers are evaluated or treated can lead to negative work ethic among educators. Frequent or poorly communicated policy changes driven by political motives can create uncertainty and stress among educators.... Decisions made without input from or communication with teachers can lead to a lack of trust in leadership.... Differences in goals and priorities between school administrators and teachers can lead to conflicts. For example, administrators might focus on standardized test scores while teachers prioritize holistic education. Political maneuvering often leads to an environment where rumors and gossip thrive, which can create a toxic work atmosphere.”

“Political pressures to meet certain targets or implement specific programs can lead to increased workload and stress for teachers. Overbearing supervision driven by political agendas can stifle teacher autonomy and creativity, reducing job satisfaction. Political dynamics often result in the formation of cliques or factions within the school staff, leading to a divided and competitive rather than collaborative environment.

Teachers might resist initiatives perceived as politically motivated rather than educationally beneficial, leading to stagnation and conflict.”

“Political interference can undermine the authority and professional judgement of educators, making them feel undervalued and disrespected. Teachers might face ethical dilemmas when asked to comply with politically motivated decisions that conflict with their professional principles, leading to negative work ethics among educators. Political conflicts at higher levels can result in inconsistent or inadequate funding, impacting school operations and teacher morale. Political considerations might influence the distribution of resources, leading to disparities that affect teachers’ ability to perform effectively.”

The data illustrate how school politics can significantly undermine efforts to promote a positive work ethic among educators by creating an environment of bias, mistrust, and conflict. Participants noted that when promotions, assignments, or resources are distributed based on favoritism rather than merit, it can lead to perceptions of injustice, which weaken educators’ morale and diminish their motivation to perform at their best. This is consistent with organizational justice theory, which posits that perceptions of fairness are critical to employee satisfaction and engagement (Pieters, 2018).

Additionally, frequent policy changes driven by political motives – especially when introduced without proper communication or input from teachers – can create uncertainty and stress, further eroding trust in leadership and diminishing work ethic (Men et al., 2023). The formation of cliques and factions as a result of political maneuvering fosters a toxic work environment where collaboration is replaced by competition, negatively impacting morale and productivity.

Moreover, political pressures to meet certain targets or implement specific programs often increase teachers’ workloads and reduce their autonomy, leading to job dissatisfaction and resistance to change. Such interference can also undermine teachers’ professional judgment, making them feel undervalued and forcing them into ethical dilemmas that conflict with their principles, which further deteriorates their work ethic

(Guerrero-Dib et al., 2023). Overall, the influence of school politics creates a challenging environment in which educators' ability to perform effectively and maintain a positive work ethic is compromised.

Lack of resources

Participants reported that a lack of resources can significantly challenge the promotion of a positive work ethic among educators. They remarked that:

"Without funds for workshops, conferences, or courses, teachers miss out on professional development that can enhance their skills and motivation. Lack of access to current educational resources and technologies hampers teachers' ability to implement modern teaching strategies effectively. Without sufficient books, supplies, and technological tools, it becomes difficult to create engaging and interactive lessons. When resources are inadequate, teachers might stick to outdated methods and be less inclined to try innovative approaches, leading to stagnation in teaching practices."

"Teachers' continual struggles to do their jobs effectively due to resource limitations can lead to frustration and can make them feel undervalued and unsupported by their administration and district. When teachers don't have the necessary tools to implement new strategies or technologies, they may resist changes and stick to what they know. Teachers may lack the tools necessary to effectively assess student learning and provide timely, constructive feedback. Limited resources can lead to fewer extracurricular programs and activities, which are crucial for student engagement and teacher-student relationships."

"In a school where resources are scarce, teachers often need to compensate by working longer hours, which can lead to stress and burnout, which could affect their effectiveness at school. Also, insufficient support staff means teachers must handle additional administrative tasks, reducing their time and energy for teaching. Without adequate resources, there might be insufficient time and space for teachers to collaborate and share best practices. Collaboration often requires shared resources, such as technology or collaborative tools, which may be lacking."

The data stress the profound impact that a lack of resources can have on promoting a positive work ethic among educators. Participants noted that inadequate funding for professional development – such as workshops and conferences – limits teachers' opportunities to enhance their skills and motivation, which are essential for maintaining high teaching standards. This aligns with the findings of Nassereddine and Nassreddine (2024), who emphasize that continuous professional development is critical for teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Additionally, the absence of up-to-date educational resources and technologies hampers educators' ability to implement modern teaching strategies, forcing them to rely on outdated methods. This stifles innovation and growth in teaching practices and may lead to frustration and a sense of being undervalued, as teachers struggle to do their jobs effectively under resource constraints. Such conditions can diminish their commitment and engagement (Kreuzfeld et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the lack of adequate resources often compels teachers to work longer hours to compensate, leading to stress and burnout, which negatively affect their effectiveness and overall well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). The scarcity of resources also hinders collaboration among teachers, as successful teamwork often requires access to shared tools and technologies, which may not be available. Without sufficient support, teachers may resist adopting new strategies or technologies, further entrenching outdated practices and reducing the overall quality of education. Therefore, providing adequate resources is crucial for fostering a positive work ethic, promoting professional growth, and ensuring the effective implementation of innovative teaching practices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of department heads in promoting positive work ethics among educators. The findings highlight the pivotal role that department heads play in fostering a culture of ethical professionalism, accountability, and collaboration

within schools. Through effective communication, continuous monitoring and evaluation, role modeling, and the provision of professional development opportunities, department heads contribute to creating an environment where educators feel valued, motivated, and committed to upholding high ethical standards.

However, promoting a positive work ethic in disadvantaged schools presents significant challenges. The lack of rewards and incentives often leads to feelings of undervaluation, reducing educators' engagement, morale, and overall job satisfaction. School politics further complicate these efforts by fostering an environment of mistrust and division, which weakens collaboration and increases resistance to change. Additionally, limited resources hinder professional growth and innovation, increase workload burdens, and contribute to burnout among educators.

Despite these challenges, the study underscores that department heads can still cultivate a strong ethical culture by fostering open communication, setting clear expectations, and leading by example. By addressing barriers through strategic leadership, advocating for necessary resources, and implementing motivation-driven initiatives, department heads can enhance educators' commitment, resilience, and professional integrity. Ultimately, fostering a positive work ethic benefits not only educators but also the broader school community, leading to improved teaching and learning outcomes.

Recommendations

To enhance the role of department heads in promoting a positive work ethic among educators, we propose several key recommendations. Effective communication should be prioritized by ensuring clear and consistent messaging about expectations, responsibilities, and ethical standards. Regular meetings, multiple communication channels, and open forums should be established to foster transparency and mutual respect.

Additionally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms – such as classroom observations, informal walk-throughs, and structured performance

reviews – should be implemented. These evaluations should include constructive feedback and goal-setting initiatives to promote continuous professional growth.

Role modeling by department heads is also crucial, as demonstrating punctuality, ethical decision-making, and a commitment to professional development can inspire educators to adopt similar behaviors. Furthermore, mentorship programs and peer learning initiatives should be encouraged to reinforce ethical practices and accountability.

Providing professional growth opportunities is essential for sustaining a strong work ethic. Department heads should facilitate training sessions, workshops, and peer observation programs to enhance educators' skills and motivation. Encouraging further qualifications and involving educators in decision-making can significantly boost morale.

Additionally, structured recognition programs – including performance-based incentives, professional development sponsorships, and career advancement opportunities – should be implemented to acknowledge educators' dedication.

Addressing resource constraints is also vital. Schools should advocate for increased funding, access to modern teaching materials, and technological tools. Partnerships with external stakeholders can help bridge resource gaps and ensure a supportive teaching environment. By implementing these recommendations, departmental heads can create a more ethical, motivated, and effective workforce, ultimately improving teacher morale and student outcomes.

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Identity motives and passion: The mediating role of identifying with an activity

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: Favorite activities often become central to self-definition, as passions and identity intertwine. This study examined whether the satisfaction of six identity motives – distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, belonging, efficacy, and meaning – predicts the strength and type of passion, and whether identifying with an activity mediates these relationships.

Research methods: A total of 209 adults completed validated tools to assess identity motives, identification with a favorite activity, and passion. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS.

Process of argumentation: Based on the dualistic model of passion and the motivated identity construction theory, the study tested direct and indirect paths: from motives through identification to passion.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Efficacy, continuity, and meaning were found to predict identity formation, which in turn predicted both harmonious and obsessive passion. Additionally, meaning and distinctiveness showed direct associations with the intensity of passion. These findings underscore the identity-based foundations of passionate engagement, which is relevant for fostering motivation in education.

Keywords:

identity motives,
passion,
identification with
activity

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The results highlight the motivational and identity-based foundation of passionate engagement. Supporting identity-related motives and identification with learning activities may promote sustained and adaptive engagement. Further longitudinal research is recommended.

Introduction

The first systematically developed model of passion is the dualistic model (DMP) proposed by Vallerand (Mageau et al., 2009; Vallerand, 2008, 2012b; Vallerand et al., 2003), in which passion is defined as “a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that individuals like (or even love), that they value, and in which they invest time and energy. These activities come to be so self-defining that they represent central features of one’s identity” (Vallerand, 2008). This kind of activity is not merely a form of entertainment that gives pleasure; it is part of personal identity (Vallerand, 2008, 2012). Research based on this model shows that the pursuit of passions gives people a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, improves their quality of life, and is conducive to the experience of positive emotions (Philippe et al., 2009; Rousseau & Vallerand, 2008; St-Louis et al., 2015).

According to the DMP, passion can be integrated into identity in two qualitatively different ways (Vallerand et al., 2003), leading to the distinction between obsessive passion (OP) and harmonious passion (HP). These two forms of passion differ primarily in the way the activity is internalized and the consequences of this internalization for functioning. Obsessive passion stems from a controlled internalization of the activity into the self, typically resulting from external or internal pressure (e.g., social expectations or self-imposed contingencies of worth). As a result, the individual experiences a compulsive urge to engage in the activity, which leads to conflicts between the activity and other aspects of life (Bouize-garene et al., 2018; Vallerand, 2008). The lack of control over the urge to participate is associated with negative affect, rumination, and interpersonal conflict when individuals are unable to engage in their activity (Carpentier et al., 2012; Mageau & Vallerand, 2007).

The other type, harmonious passion, results from the activity being autonomously internalized into one's identity. In this case, the individual feels a desire to engage in an activity voluntarily and without pressure, while maintaining control over the engagement. Those with HP are able to reconcile engagement with other aspects of life without experiencing conflicts and to flexibly engage in their activity. Meta-analytical findings indicate that harmonious passion is associated with adaptive outcomes, such as enhanced well-being, persistence, and positive affect, and does not interfere with other important life goals (Curran et al., 2015). The present study investigates not only the types of passion, but also its strength, understood as long-term engagement and interest that comprises three defining components: time investment, a love of the activity, and the perception of the activity as being personally important. In other words, the strength of passion reflects the degree to which an activity is a passion: a lasting engagement significant to the individual.

Passion also plays an important role in teaching and education. On the one hand, passion fosters persistence and motivation, which are crucial for success in learning. For example, research suggests that harmonious passion can help students in their education to persist towards their anticipated careers in a balanced and positive way (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). The path analysis results indicate that harmonious passion was associated with the adoption of mastery goals, which subsequently led to higher performance levels within a population of expert musicians. Conversely, obsessive passion was linked to a negative impact on performance achievement (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011a).

On the other hand, a recent study conducted by Chichekian, Vallerand, and Rahimi (2024) revealed that students who perceive their teachers as passionate about teaching resulted in more positive and fewer negative emotions in the classroom, affecting students' perceptions of their passion. Additionally, positive classroom emotions were shown to cultivate students' harmonious passion, while both positive and negative emotions contributed to the development of obsessive passion. These findings offer support for a passion transmission model in education, highlighting the role of teachers' passion and support of students'

autonomy in shaping their passion for a subject through their emotional experiences in class (Chichekian et al., 2024).

Few studies, however, have investigated the determinants of passion (Bouizegarene et al., 2018; Mageau et al., 2009). In particular, there are few studies that address what contributes to the inclusion of an activity in a person's identity, what promotes their identification with the activity, and what identity processes are involved in developing a passion (Bouizegarene et al., 2018), although in Vallerand's model (Vallerand et al., 2003) identification with a passion is its defining feature, distinguishing passion from other forms of engagement. The study revealed (Bouizegarene et al., 2018) that HP was positively associated with identity integration and informational identity style, whereas OP was negatively associated with identity integration and positively associated with normative identity style. Bouizegarene and colleagues also found that an informational identity style led to HP, especially when accompanied by a high level of identity integration.

From the social cognitive point of view, represented by Vignoles' (2011) motivated identity construction theory, identity encompasses those aspects of life (e.g., roles or favorite activities) that satisfy certain basic motives: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, belonging, efficacy, and meaning. It postulates that the construction of personal (and social) identity is driven by the satisfaction of these six basic motives. The model includes *the distinctiveness motive*, directed towards establishing and maintaining a sense of being that differs from others – a sense of uniqueness; *the continuity motive*, referring to the motivation to maintain a sense of continuity of who one is in time (between the past, present, and future) and regardless of the situation; *the self-esteem motive*, which concerns the motivation to maintain and strengthen a positive self-concept; *the belonging motive*, concerning the need to maintain and strengthen a sense of being close to and accepted by others, both in dyadic relationships and in a group; *the efficacy motive*, oriented towards maintaining and strengthening the sense of competence and control; and *the meaning motive*, which refers to the need for meaning or purpose in one's existence. Considering the development of passion from the perspective

offered by the motivated identity construction theory, one can conclude that the satisfaction of basic identity motives is a factor related to the development of passion. The activity associated with the satisfaction of these motives becomes an aspect of one's identity and thus turns into a lasting passion. Moreover, the individual's identification with the activity probably plays a key role in this process, which takes place when the activity satisfies the identity motives.

Based on the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2008, 2012) and the identity construction theory (Vignoles et al., 2006), the present study addresses the issues of the determinants of passion and its links with activity and identity. We explored which of the basic identity motives (distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, belonging, efficacy, and meaning) might explain the strength and type of passion (obsessive and harmonious). We also expected that identification with a favorite activity would mediate the relationship between motive satisfaction and passion. Passion also plays a significant role in the educational context, where it supports motivation, sustained engagement, and long-term persistence in learning (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013; Chichekian et al., 2024). Exploring how identity motives contribute to the development of passion may help educators better understand the psychological mechanisms that foster students' internal commitment to learning activities.

Background

The main problem addressed in the study is the links between identity motives and the strength and type of passion and the mediating role of identification with activity between motives and passion. Identification results in experiencing the activity as personally significant, which means that – in a way – when engaging in the activity, the individual fulfills an important aspect of themselves and experiences satisfaction with the activity; this is reflected in the strength of passion and in its obsessive and harmonious forms. Moreover, research shows that passionate people identify more strongly with their activity than non-passionate individuals

(Mageau et al., 2009). Therefore, in the present study we predicted that identification with activity would be positively related to both the strength and the type of passion and that its relationship to obsessive passion would be stronger. We were interested in which motives were indirectly, directly, or both indirectly and directly related to the strength and type of passion and whether the type of passion differed in terms of its direct links with motives.

Identification with activity is treated as a mediator between motives and passion. It is assumed that if an activity satisfies all motives, it promotes identification with that activity, which in turn is a mediator in the relationship between the motives and the strength and type of passion. Direct relationships between motives and passion are also possible. This particularly applies to the self-esteem motive. Research shows that obsessive passion is related to lower levels of global self-esteem and self-esteem fluctuation resulting from activity performance, whereas people with harmonious passion do not report such relationships (Mageau et al., 2011). Based on these findings, we expected that the self-esteem motive would be directly and negatively related to obsessive passion and positively related to strength of passion and harmonious passion.

To sum up, the main aim of the study was to examine the associations between six identity motives, identification with activity (identity interest), and passion. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and existing empirical evidence, five research hypotheses were proposed. We predicted that (1) the satisfaction of the six motives by an activity would have a positive relationship with identification with the activity. We hypothesized that (2) all motives except self-esteem would be positively associated with the strength and type of passion. Moreover, we expected that (3) the self-esteem motive would correlate negatively with obsessive passion and positively with harmonious passion. We also predicted that (4) identification with activity would be a significant mediator between motives and passion. Finally (5), since identification is a crucial feature of passion, it should directly contribute to the strength of passion and should be positively related to HP and OP.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 209$) were recruited by trained research assistants from among university students and willing persons from their social environment. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study participants were 209 Polish-speaking individuals living in Poland: 119 women, 89 men, and 1 unspecified. Their mean age was 32 years ($SD = 10.8$). The respondents completed all questionnaires in private.

Measures

Passion for an Activity. In order to assess passion, we administered the Passion Scale (Vallerand et al., 2003). This 16-item measure consists of two 6-item subscales, assessing HP and OP. Four items concern the defining elements of passion and can be used to assess strength of passion (SP; e.g., “I spend a lot of time doing this activity”). The participants were asked to rate all items on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = “do not agree at all” to 7 = “very strongly agree”). The reliability coefficients for the HP, OP and SP subscales were .83, .84, and .86, respectively. The participants were asked to respond to the items with reference to a specific activity that they were passionate about. The Polish adaptation of the Passion Scale has been found to have acceptable validity and reliability (Kwapis & Batory-Ginda, 2023).

It is important to mention that an activity is considered a passion when a person has scored 4 or higher on the SP subscale, which serves as a criterion subscale. This cut-off point is computed as the mean of four SP item scores and has served in many studies to differentiate between people who are passionate about an activity and those who are not (Bonnevill-Roussy et al., 2013).

Identity Motives. To assess the satisfaction of identity motives, we adapted the Identity Questionnaire developed by Vignoles and colleagues (2006) to the context of people’s passionate activities. Participants rated to what extent their passionate activity is associated with feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, and

meaning. Each of the six motives was measured by means of a single question (e.g., in the case of efficacy: “To what extent does your activity make you feel competent?”), using a 7-point rating scale (1 = “not at all” and 7 = “extremely”).

Identification With Activity. The Identity Interest Scale measures the level of identification with an activity. It was also developed for the purposes of this study in order to supplement the DMP-based measurement of SP with the measurement of identification with activity. The instrument consists of 5 items (e.g., “My activity is an important part of who I am”), which the respondents rate on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = “completely disagree” and 7 = “completely agree”). The reliability of the scale, measured with the internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach’s α), is .92.

Results and Discussion

Data Analysis

The analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (v.3.1) for SPSS. For each dependent variable – strength of passion, obsessive passion, and harmonious passion – we tested six separate mediation models (Model 4), each with one identity motive as the independent variable (X), identification with activity as the mediator (M), and the passion outcome as the dependent variable (Y). In each model, the remaining five identity motives were included as covariates to control for shared variance. This approach yielded a total of 18 mediation analyses. Indirect effects were tested using the bootstrapping method with 1,000 resamples. The first mediation analysis (for strength of passion) was performed for the total sample of 209 subjects. Further analyses, concerning OP and HP, were performed only for those participants whose activity met the passion criterion ($N = 184$).

There were no missing values. Data screening for outliers revealed no value higher than three standard deviations from the mean. We performed a correlation analysis to determine the relationships between the variables. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all the variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations
for all the variables (N = 209)**

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Strength of passion	21.84	5.208									
2. Obsessive passion	20.99	8.389	.54*								
3. Harmonious passion	32.56	6.265	.70*	.29*							
4. Identity interest	55.95	12.802	.78*	.64*	.58*						
5. Distinctiveness	6.78	2.569	.57*	.47*	.39*	.62*					
6. Continuity	6.61	2.306	.42*	.28*	.37*	.56*	.49*				
7. Self-esteem	7.58	1.915	.59*	.31*	.54*	.55*	.62*	.43*			
8. Belonging	7.09	2.133	.46*	.40*	.30*	.52*	.54*	.39*	.48*		
9. Efficacy	7.24	1.662	.48*	.28*	.42*	.60*	.48*	.52*	.50*	.45*	
10. Meaning	7.24	2.089	.58*	.49*	.48*	.67*	.45*	.51*	.52*	.47*	.56*

* $p < .001$

Strength of Passion. Significant results were found for the model with direct relationships between the motives and identification ($F(6, 202) = 52.72$, $p < .001$) and it explains 61% of the variance in identification. Significant positive relationships between motives and identification were found for continuity ($B = 0.64$, $p < .001$), efficacy ($B = 1.05$, $p < .001$), distinctiveness ($B = 0.38$, $p < .001$), and meaning ($B = 0.83$, $p < .001$). We observed no significant links between the self-esteem and belonging motives and identification with activity. The results concerning the model with direct relationships between strength of passion and both motives and identification indicate that the model is significant ($F(7, 201) = 38.562$, $p < .001$) and explains 57% of the variance. Identification with activity was significantly, positively related to SP ($B = 0.36$, $p < .001$).

To determine the presence of mediation, we used the bootstrapping method with 1,000 interactions. The results indicate that identity motives had a significant indirect effect on strength of passion via identification with activity. Table 2 presents the results of the bootstrap analysis.

We found significant mediation effects in the case of the continuity, meaning, efficacy, and distinctiveness motives. All effects were positive and the strongest effect was observed for the efficacy motive. In the case of continuity and efficacy, the mediation was full, which means that their direct effects were not significant. In the case of meaning and distinctiveness, the mediation was partial, which means that the direct effects of these motives were significant ($B = 0.43, p < .01$; $\beta = 0.33, p < .05$). In the case of self-esteem and belonging, the indirect effects were not significant and self-esteem had only a direct effect on strength of passion ($B = 0.66, p < .001$). The satisfaction of the continuity, meaning, efficacy, and distinctiveness motives increased identification with activity, which in turn increased the strength of passion. As regards the self-esteem motive, satisfaction of it directly increased the strength of passion; the same goes for meaning and distinctiveness, although these motives were also indirectly related to passion.

Table 2. Bootstrap Analysis of the Indirect Effects of Identity Motives on Strength of Passion

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
Continuity > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.23	0.07	0.085	0.369
Meaning > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.30	0.1	0.136	0.527
Efficacy > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.38	0.13	0.154	0.662
Belonging > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.04	0.06	−0.076	0.164
Self-Esteem > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.04	0.07	−0.1	0.186
Distinctiveness > Identity Interest > Strength of Passion	0.14	0.08	0.008	0.311

Obsessive Passion. The results indicate that the model including direct relationships between motives and identification with activity was significant ($F(6, 177) = 43.46, p < .001$) and explained 60% of the variance. Significant positive relationships between motives and identification were found for continuity ($B = 0.72, p < .001$), efficacy ($B = 1.03, p < .001$),

and meaning ($B = 0.71, p < .05$). We observed no significant links between the self-esteem, belonging, and distinctiveness motives and identification with activity.

The results concerning the model of direct relationships between OP and identity motives and identification show that the model is significant ($F(7, 176) = 14.40, p < .001$) and explained 36% of the variance. Identification with activity was significantly, positively related to OP ($B = 0.48, p < .001$).

To determine the presence of mediation, we used the bootstrapping method with 1,000 interactions. The results indicate that identity motives had significant indirect effects on OP via identity interest. Table 3 presents the results of the bootstrap analysis. We found significant mediation effects in the case of the continuity, meaning, and efficacy motives. All effects were positive, and the strongest effect was observed for the efficacy motive (.49). In the case of continuity, the mediation effect was full. In the case of efficacy and meaning, the mediation effects were partial and there were significant direct effects from two motives: negative for efficacy ($B = -1.15, p < .01$) and positive for meaning ($B = 1.39, p < .001$). In the case of the self-esteem, distinctiveness, and belonging motives, the indirect effects were non-significant; self-esteem and distinctiveness had only direct effects on OP ($B = -0.82, p < .05$; $B = 1.23, p < .001$), while in the case of the self-esteem motive, the effect was negative. Satisfaction of the continuity, meaning, and efficacy motives by an activity increased identification with the activity, which in turn strengthened OP. As far as direct effects are concerned, the lower the satisfaction of the self-esteem and efficacy motives, the higher the level of OP. Meaning and distinctiveness, by contrast, directly strengthened OP.

Table 3. Bootstrap Analysis of the Indirect Effects of Identity Motives on Obsessive Passion

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
Continuity > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.35	0.14	0.101	0.631
Meaning > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.34	0.14	0.105	0.666
Efficacy > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.49	0.20	0.144	0.911
Belonging > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.13	0.09	−0.030	0.323
Self-Esteem > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.12	0.10	−0.046	0.366
Distinctiveness > Identity Interest > Obsessive Passion	0.03	0.08	−0.132	0.208

Harmonious Passion. The results concerning the direct relationships between identity motives and identification are redundant with the results concerning OP, since both analyses were performed on the same sample. The results indicate that the model including direct associations of motives and identification with HP was significant ($F(7, 176) = 18.41, p < .001$) and explained 43% of the variance. Identification with activity was significantly, positively related to HP ($B = 0.21, p < .05$).

To determine the presence of mediation, we used the bootstrapping method with 1,000 interactions. The results indicated that there were significant indirect effects of identity motives on HP via identification with activity. Table 4 presents the results of the bootstrap analysis. We found significant mediation effects in the case of the continuity, meaning, and efficacy motives. All these effects were positive and full, which means that the direct effects were not significant. The effect was the strongest for efficacy. In the case of self-esteem, distinctiveness, and belonging, the indirect effects were not significant and self-esteem had a direct effect only on HP ($B = 1.42, p < .001$). Satisfaction of the continuity, meaning, and efficacy motives strengthened identification with activity, which in turn strengthened HP, whereas the satisfaction of the self-esteem motive strengthened HP directly.

**Table 4. Bootstrap Analysis of the Indirect Effects of Identity Motives
on Harmonious Passion**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
Continuity > Identity Interest > Harmonious Passion	0.15	0.078	0.009	0.315
Meaning > Identity Interest > Harmonious Passion	0.15	0.091	0.010	0.363
Efficacy > Identity Interest > Harmonious Passion	0.21	0.116	0.012	0.468
Belonging > Identity Interest > Harmonious passion	0.06	0.049	−0.013	0.175
Self-esteem > Identity Interest > Harmonious Passion	0.05	0.053	−0.022	0.183
Distinctiveness > Identity Interest > Harmonious Passion	0.01	0.041	−0.065	0.103

Discussion

We expected that the satisfaction of identity motives by a given activity would be positively related to identification and that all motives except self-esteem would be positively related to strength of passion and to both types of passion, while self-esteem would correlate negatively with OP and positively with HP. We also expected that identification would be a significant mediator between motives and passion. Below, we present a theoretical interpretation of the results. However, this explanation is hypothetical, as the research was not conducted in an experimental model.

Strength of Passion

The results show that the satisfaction of motives (continuity, meaning, efficacy, and distinctiveness) leads to identification with an activity, which in turn translates into the strength of the passion. The particularly significant motive is efficacy; from the perspective of the motivated identity construction theory, this means that one's sense of competence and agency associated with performing an activity promotes its integration into one's identity, increases the strength of one's passion, and may thereby strengthen interest and engagement. The results also reveal

the mediating role of identification with activity. As a result of identification, performing the activity makes it possible to experience oneself *in vivo* as an effective person, which increases willingness to engage in the activity, thus increasing the strength of one's passion.

Also, the satisfaction of the continuity motive is positively related to identification. The sense of continuity presupposes that the activity being measured has been performed many times and, consequently, may have already been integrated into the individual's identity, which is why a positive relationship is observed between this motive and identification with activity. Continuity in understanding oneself and a consistent self-narrative despite the passing years is a universal need conducive to internal integration (McAdams, 2001). By performing the activity, the individual maintains the relationship between their past self and their present self, and therefore there is a link between continuity and identification.

Neither the efficacy motive nor the continuity motive is directly related to strength of passion. Their significance manifests itself only in the presence of identification with activity. What also favors identification with activity is satisfaction of the meaning motive. The results suggest that if a person experiences a sense of meaning when performing an activity, the activity may be integrated into their identity. In that case, engagement in the activity intensifies the sense of meaning in life, which translates into consolidated engagement and strengthened passion. The results also reveal that meaning satisfaction increased the strength of passion directly as well. The direct relationship between the meaning motive and strength of passion may indicate that this motive stimulates engagement in the activity without the need to identify with it.

Furthermore, the satisfaction of the distinctiveness motive promotes identification with activity. This means that if an activity makes an individual feel that they are unique, they more willingly identify with this activity. In this case, we also found a direct relationship to passion. Satisfaction of the self-esteem motive had only a direct effect on strength of passion. In a way, such a result points to the dominant role of self-esteem and generalized striving for self-worth (Tesser & Martin, 2006). As in the case of meaning and distinctiveness, this finding shows that satisfying

this motive is so important that it does not have to be mediated by identification.

Of the six identity motives, only belonging turned out to be irrelevant both to identification with activity and to the strength and type of passion. It is possible that the significance of this motive manifests itself in passions that involve cooperation with others, but this conjecture requires empirical verification. In summary, the satisfaction of efficacy, continuity, meaning, and distinctiveness motives indirectly increased the strength of passion via identification with activity.

Types of Passion

Our mediation analysis revealed that the continuity, efficacy, and meaning motives were related to identification with activity, which in turn was related to the types of passion. No relationship was found between identification and distinctiveness. This may be due to the nature of the sample, which consisted of individuals who reached or exceeded the cut-off score on the Strength of Passion subscale, indicating that their favorite activity met the criteria for a developed passion. This would suggest that when an activity is not a clearly developed passion, the distinctiveness motive promotes identification, increases the strength of passion, and ceases to be significant once a passion has developed. It is as if in those individuals whose activity is already a fully formed passion, the satisfaction of the desire to make themselves unique does not matter.

In the case of both OP and HP, we observed significant mediation effects of identification with activity for the continuity, meaning, and efficacy motives. All effects are positive, and the strongest one was observed for efficacy. From the perspective of the motivated identity construction theory, the sense of continuity and meaning in life and the experience of one's competence in the context of an activity favor identification with it and strengthen both harmonious and obsessive engagement. The results suggest that identification is more strongly related to OP than it is to HP. This is consistent with the predictions and with other research indicating that individuals with obsessive passion perceive their activity as occupying

a larger part of their identity than individuals with harmonious passion (Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1).

OP and HP differ mainly in the number of direct effects, the type of mediation (full or partial), and the role of the self-esteem motive. In the case of HP, all mediation effects are full. In other words, the continuity, efficacy, and meaning motives strengthen HP only when accompanied by identification with activity. In the case of OP, by contrast, full mediation is observed only for the continuity motive, whereas for the meaning and efficacy motives the mediation is partial: positive in the case of meaning and negative in the case of efficacy. This suggests that in the case of obsessive passion, the activity is also performed in order to provide a sense of meaning without the presence of identification. In the case of efficacy, the negative effect suggests that a lower satisfaction of this motive leads to stronger obsessive engagement. However, in view of the correlational design of the study, the reverse relationship between these variables should also be taken into consideration. It can be concluded that the obsessive mode of engagement is not conducive to satisfying the competence motive, and that – due to the fact that obsessive passion often involves conflict with other domains of an individual's life and that this kind of passion may be difficult to control – it may contribute to lower performance and a sense of lower competence and influence. The analysis of the direct relationships between OP and the meaning and efficacy motives suggests that individuals with obsessive passion engage in their activity in order to experience meaning even if they do not have a sense of competence and efficacy.

HP and OP also differ in their direct relationships to self-esteem and distinctiveness. The relationship between the self-esteem motive and OP is negative and its relationship with HP is positive, whereas the distinctiveness motive is positively related to OP and not significantly related to HP. Sense of distinctiveness is related to obsessive engagement when there is no identification, which means that the need to be unique favors obsessive engagement. Another result that differs between OP and HP concerns the self-esteem motive. The higher the satisfaction of the self-esteem motive, the higher the level of HP; the lower the satisfaction of this

motive, the higher the level of OP. This is consistent with our expectations based on research in which obsessive passion turned out to be related to lower self-esteem (Mageau et al., 2011), while harmonious passion was associated with well-being and positive affect (Carpentier et al., 2012). The negative link between self-esteem and OP indicates that in the case of OP, individuals engage in their activity even if it does not contribute to a positive view of themselves. However, given the correlational design of the study, a reverse relationship should also be considered. Obsessive engagement is not conducive to the satisfaction of the self-esteem motive for reasons that include conflict with other life domains; such a conflict can lead to lower performance and/or a lack of the expected success, which translates into low satisfaction of the self-esteem motive.

To sum up, the results of the present study indicate that both types of passion are related to identification with activity, which means it can be concluded that engagement in an activity they are passionate about is part of the individual's identity. The results also suggest that, due to its links with identification, OP is more strongly associated with identity than HP. At the same time, OP is linked in a more complex way to the satisfaction of basic identity motives than HP, in the sense that in the former case, the passionate activity is also performed for reasons unrelated to identity. This means that harmonious engagement takes place mainly when the individual identifies with the activity, while obsessive engagement occurs not only under those conditions, but also as a result of direct gratification of identity motives. The continuity, efficacy, and meaning motives are related to OP indirectly, through identification. As regards HP, it is directly related to thinking positively about oneself and indirectly related to the meaning, efficacy, and continuity motives via identification, the mediations being full.

Contribution

Based on the results showing what underlies the strength of a passion, it is also possible to formulate implications for the theory of passion. Passion is defined as a stable interest and engagement in an activity. Our results suggest that the lasting character of engagement is achieved

through identification with an activity, which is the case when the activity becomes a relatively stable element of the self. The results indicate that what it takes for a person to identify with an activity is the interaction of the meaning, efficacy, and continuity motives and, until a certain moment, the distinctiveness motive. It is possible that identification and interest consolidate when an activity satisfies these three motives, but it is also possible that identification is a product of interactions between the motives, which are known to be interrelated (Vignoles et al., 2006). The satisfaction of a single motive (e.g., efficacy) may not be enough to trigger the identification process – for example, when a person is good at dancing but it is not important to them. It is possible to imagine an interplay of the meaning and efficacy motives, which may be crucial at the initial stage of developing identification, whereas in the subsequent stages it is the continuity motive that gains significance. This means that a passion can be determined by different factors at different stages of its development. The results suggest the considerable significance of the self-esteem motive, which can stimulate individuals to engage in an activity without the need to identify with it. Perhaps identification is a secondary outcome of engagement stimulated by the self-esteem motive; this can be verified in longitudinal studies.

The results provide insight on how to enhance passion and engagement, which can be particularly significant in education. The findings suggest that identifying with an activity, which is reinforced by identity motives, is crucial. Therefore, in the educational process, for example, the importance and usefulness of the content being taught should be explained to students and given value (meaning motive), or tasks and content should be organized in a way that strengthens the efficacy and self-esteem motives.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Some limitations of the study should be mentioned. These involve methodological limitations: it employed a correlational design, which does not allow for explaining causal links; the above explanations, assuming causality, are based on theoretical speculation and are hypotheses.

Experimental and longitudinal studies are necessary to test them. Another methodological limitation is associated with the method of measuring identity motives. Although single-item measurement has its advantages, such as a shorter procedure, a more complex scale should be used in further research to test measurement reliability.

Moreover, the mediation analysis for SP, OP, and HP was performed on similar samples (in the case of OP and HP, the samples were identical). To pinpoint the associations of motives and identification with OP and HP, it is advisable to conduct further research on two samples, one composed of subjects with OP and the other composed of subjects with HP.

Another limitation of the study concerns the choice of method for statistical analysis. Due to the limited sample size ($N = 209$; $N = 184$ for the OP and HP analyses), structural equation modeling was not applied, as such a sample could lead to unstable parameter estimates and seemingly significant effects. Instead, separate mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro was conducted. In future studies, it would be advisable to test the proposed model using structural equation modeling with a larger sample, which would allow for simultaneous estimation of all paths and a more comprehensive assessment of the structure of relationships.

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