

## **“We Do Everything with Our Own Hands” – Everyday Experiences of Teachers Working with Migrant Children in Poland**

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The aim of this article is to analyse how teachers experience, navigate and negotiate their daily work in Polish school with migrant children. We explore the title statement of one of the teachers we interviewed – we look at the teachers’ strategy of ‘doing everything with their own hands’. The data presented in the article comes from the quantitative and qualitative study conducted within the CHILD-UP project. The research was conducted in two different locations that allowed us to capture the diversity of migrant children in terms of their status and the specificity of working with them: in a large city in the south of Poland characterized by a significant influx of immigrants in recent years, and in the Lublin Province, where schools are attended mostly by refugee children from Centers for Foreigners. The article provides an analysis of teachers’ agency at three different interconnected levels: the macro level (public policies), the meso level (local community), and the micro level (specific schools and their community). We claim that teachers’ agency expressed by them in

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a constant search for new tools to support migrant children’s education and integration is shaped by complexities of social, economic and political factors produced by the school system in Poland.

**Key words:** migrant children, school, Poland, agency

## Introduction

The year 2020 brought a number of reflections related to the daily life of schools in the era of the SARS-coV-2 pandemic. Public discussions in Poland focused on children’s mental health, the impact of isolation on peer relationships, and inequalities in the education system revealed or even reinforced by the pandemic. On the margins of these debates, some voices have also been raised about the role and working conditions of teachers. In this context, in late 2020 and 2021, within the CHILD-UP<sup>2</sup> project we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with teachers working with children with a migrant background, preceded by a quantitative survey also conducted among the same professional group. Due to restrictions introduced in schools because of the pandemic, interviews were conducted remotely: online or over the phone, thus revealing the specificity of the experience of social interactions in the context of the outbreak of the infectious disease. Their aim was to learn about professional experiences of teachers working with migrant and refugee children, to explore the tools available at work, to understand the barriers in teaching and to map the sources of support that teachers have access to on a daily basis. The qualitative research went beyond the pandemic period with its thematic and temporal scope, collecting stories of this professional group from many years. It is worth noting, however, that an additional and unexpected advantage of conducting research during the period of social turbulence was the opportunity to explore teachers’ experiences both before the coronavirus emerged and during remote teaching. The latter period, according to the interviewees, revealed pre-existing problems and barriers related to teaching pupils with migrant background.

In this paper we want to look at how teachers experience, navigate and negotiate their daily work in school with migrant children. We explore the title statement of one of the teachers we interviewed – we look at the teachers’ strategy of ‘doing everything with their own hands’. By doing that we claim that teachers’ agency expressed by them in a constant search for new tools to support migrant children’s education and integration is shaped by complexities of social, economic and political factors produced by the school system in Poland. The analysis includes data collected from both quantitative and qualitative research. In the quantitative research section, we show how teachers assess their agency, how they define problems and

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challenges when working with migrant children, and how they deal with them. The findings from the qualitative part further discuss these issues, examined in three main areas. First, we look at the availability of resources for teachers, which we define as the knowledge, skills, various sources of support and institutional frameworks that make up teachers' primary toolbox. Second, we look at teacher agency in working with migrant children, presenting situations and areas in which our interviewees take their own initiative in shaping programs and tools at school. Finally, we present how teachers evaluate their own professional performance and how they assess their work with migrant children. This approach allows us to take a comprehensive look at the experiences of this group, revealing both constant and dynamic elements that shape their working conditions, constraints and possibilities in creating, implementing and sustaining inclusiveness in school.

## **School in macro, meso and micro perspectives**

The issue of teachers' experiences of working with children with a migrant background can be analysed through various perspectives. The macro lens provides us with frames, regulations and measures of both immigration and education policies of a given country. Such broad frames create a formal ground for teachers and equip them with basic programmes and tools to be implemented and set the limits for their actions in schools. At the meso level institutions supporting schools and teachers as well as local integration solutions are the centre of the analysis. Usually applying a meso-lens allows researchers to explore policy implementation processes from the perspective of various institutionalised and non-institutionalised actors engaging local communities in everyday practices. Finally, the micro perspective allows us to investigate the experiences of individual schools and teachers working in them. Ultimately, while analysing teachers' lived realities, we might include all these diverse factors and conditions that range from the general assumptions of a country's immigration policy through system design and local environment to the families of the students themselves and their cultural capital (Devine 2011, 2013; Erel 2010; Slany et al. 2016; Ślusarczyk, Nikielska-Sekuła 2014). We briefly examine this multiplicity of factors in this section.

## **Policy**

From the point of view of the state, school is a social space in which citizenship and subjectivities are produced – students' attitudes, values, skills and knowledge. For this reason the school system becomes a constant point of interest for policy makers (Boli, Ramirez, Meyer 1985; Hadjar, Becker 2009; Labaree 2012). Systemic so-

lutions leading (or not) to the realization of equal opportunities and the provision of needed support for students and teachers working with them are crucial here. In relation to migrant children, this concerns the moment of entry of the migrant child into the education system as well as the subsequent learning period. For years, there has been considerable debate as to whether second language teaching should be provided through immersion, transitional bilingual education (often provided in a protected and therefore segregated environment), through separate, sometimes stigmatizing programs that may interfere with students' access to the normal course of lessons, or through a bi- or multilingual education (Bartlett 2015, OECD 2006; Slavin, Cheung 2005). In the Polish context, the third solution is still rather not implemented, mainly due to the relatively low number of children and their geographical dispersion (see e.g. Januszewska 2017, Pawlak 2013). Todorovska-Sokolovska (2010) distinguishes two broad strategies for the entry of migrant children into the education system – separation and integration, which we can also see as a sort of continuum of strategies, concepts and solutions. In its extreme version, the first can mean the promotion of separateness and can also lead to exclusion and strengthen the already existing inequalities between pupils due to their origin. On the other hand, such a strategy may take into account the difficulties experienced by newcomers in school and lead to development of new solutions for these challenges. This could be illustrated by creating "welcome classes"<sup>3</sup> for migrant children, where they stay for a certain period of time to learn the language of instruction intensively before entering their destination schools. The second strategy means giving priority to inclusion, integrating children into the host country environment as soon as possible and providing additional support (e.g. Polish language classes) when needed. Polish law provides for the possibility of additional hours of Polish language and remedial classes for foreign children, yet as we will show further quite often the specific measures applied in school depend on local community budget limitations<sup>4</sup>. Finally, responsiveness of curricula and pedagogical methods to migrants and openness to diversity are important factors of support as well (Bennet 2001). This is still a challenge in the Polish context, as is the dissemination of inter- and multicultural teacher training (Bartlett 2015, Nikitorowicz 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> Legal solution existing in Poland since 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign students mostly learn in classrooms with their Polish peers, and those who do not know or whose command of the Polish language is poor have the right to additional Polish language classes amounting to a minimum of 2 hours a week and to additional remedial courses if they need them. A total number of such additional classes amounts to 5 hours a week. In order to facilitate expeditious and effective inclusion of students coming from abroad into the Polish educational system it has been made possible as of 1 September 2017 to establish preparatory classes at schools. A student who does not know or has poor command of the Polish language, or has difficulties in adapting due to cultural differences or a change of their educational environment due, for example, to their previous educational experience abroad, or who has difficulties resulting from crisis or traumatic situations because of military conflicts, natural calamities or other humanitarian crises, may be qualified into such a class.

## Local community level

Analysing measures introduced at the local community level and impacting teacher-student relations requires consideration of two key factors: the number of migrant students and the issue of financing education (Bartlett 2015). Despite the growing number of migrants in individual schools in Poland, children are still few in number, scattered in different classes and thus, even with goodwill, their problems may be overlooked. The second issue is the amount of the educational subsidy. All public schools are subsidized according to a uniform scheme, but differences appear at the level of local community because the subsidy alone is not enough to maintain the school. Poorer municipalities (*gmina*) are less able to support programs addressed to this group of students. Furthermore, rural communities are often deprived of access to systemic solutions and programmes supporting migrant pupils (e.g. there are no available welcome classes and teacher training centers are located in cities rather than in the rural area). It is also worth pointing out that the poorest communes are located in the eastern part of the country, where most of the centres for foreigners are situated.

## Schools and teachers

Schools are an important place for the socialization of pupils and, in the case of children with a migrant background, also for acculturation, integration or assimilation. They provide space for deep contact with the culture of the host community. A child with a migrant background entering school is at the intersection of the interests of different institutions, and their situation will be the result of the pressures of the host society, of integration policies, of family circumstances, and finally – albeit in later years of schooling – of personal choices.

Devine (2013), referring to the human capital paradigm and the neoliberal mindset, draws attention to valuing children in and out of school. This means prioritizing children in terms of their performance and their fit with the demands of the education system. Moreover, this can happen even in the context of inclusive education if migrant children, like other children with so-called special needs, are labelled as a problem to be solved. It is even more evident in relation to, as Grek (2009) puts it, governing by numbers, i.e. taking into account and analyzing the issue of migrant background when reflecting on the results of PISA tests. According to Devine, such an approach does not so much lead to strengthening support mechanisms (although it is possible), but to objectifying students, treating them as promising (or not) to meet exorbitant educational standards constructed in the likeness of corporations (Devine 2013: 283, Devine 2002). As a result, children who require support are treated as a “threat” to system achievement, a “fixing failure” (Reay 2005), rather than a potential added value for host societies. Such value, argues Zeiher and colleagues (2007),

can only be provided when they fit into the social norms of immigration countries. If this does not happen, there is a temptation to politically influence values through strategies that are not so much integration as assimilation. The children themselves, or rather their parents, in order to protect themselves, may in such a situation reach for strategies of invisibility, of blending into the system (Ślusarczyk 2019). Ultimately, the tension between seeing children as potential productive citizens (especially in the context of aging societies) and looking at them holistically as human beings is realized in, as Fraser (2000) points out in the politics of recognition: who is recognized and what is recognized as of value. Assumptions related to ethnicity, especially the expectation of failure outlined above, also relate to potential behavioural problems (Margari et al. 2013). In this case, expectations also differ according to the ethnic group analysed and, although problems do occur, perceptual bias, differences in social desirability and protest or differences in parents', adolescents' and teachers' thresholds to report child problem behaviours must also be taken into account (Stevens et al. 2003). At the same time, as Devine notes, these processes create the potential for change. By treating the school space as a Bourdiean social field (1973, Mills 2008; Crossley 2003), a site of clashing power and interests directed at maintaining the social order on the one hand and transforming it on the other, we have the opportunity to conceptualize the school as a social, relational and causal space. This allows for a more nuanced analysis of the processes of both production and reproduction that lead to different trajectories of learning, establishing relationships with others and constructing identities by migrant children, building strategies of adjustment or negotiation and resistance, as they are not a homogenous "whole" and enter the education system with very different ethnic, social and migratory (including pre-migration, Fernandez-Kelly 2008) experiences. Framed in this way, they constitute children's everyday experiences and identities and at the same time provide the context for teachers' pedagogical actions (Devine 2013).

A different term, however, leading to similar questions about the framework, is inclusive education, which according to UNESCO also includes the education of students with special educational needs and related support (Grünberger, Kyriazopoulou, Soriano 2009, Herudzińska 2018). The fundamental goal of inclusive education is to create an educational institution that can accommodate and equally effectively educate and nurture all children in the local community, regardless of their background, disabilities or individual problems. Each "new" pupil need, from the point of view of the educational institution, is a kind of "litmus paper", showing to what extent the school is ready to implement such a policy. The term, now very widespread, can, however, be understood in different ways and, consequently, can lead to the adoption of different action strategies. Ainscow, together with a team of his colleagues (Ainscow et al. 2008, Ainscow 2015), distinguishes six definitions of inclusive education: caring only for children and young people with "special educational needs"; looking for solutions for students who leave school early due to social maladjustment; responding to the

diverse needs of students resulting from the risk of social exclusion; caring for the educational conditions and preparing the school to accept students with diverse needs, thus creating the so-called “school for all”; taking care of the educational conditions and preparing the school to accept students with diverse needs and, finally; strengthening their sense of empowerment and agency (Baraldi, Iervese 2017, Baraldi et al. 2021). Thus, for us it is important that the activities of inclusive education can lead to strategies when support is given, mainly in terms of teaching, but without inclusive activities, as well as building an open inclusive community. Markowska-Manista (2016) refers to this as opening or closing the school as an institution, and Krzychała and Zamorska (2011) refer to this as closed school culture change which:

from the perspective of an external observer and sometimes from the perspective of the people involved, significantly changes the ways in which the teacher’s didactic and educational work is organized; however, they only marginally affect the most essential dimensions of school culture. These changes are encapsulated in the already entrenched pragmatic patterns of action and orientation of a given school community (Krzychała, Zamorska 2011:58).

Peter Senge (2000) notes that there is often a dissonance between teachers’ declarations of inclusive assumptions and the actual implementation of traditional, deeply held personal beliefs, values and attitudes expressed in interaction with students, incompatible with ideas of inclusion. However, if the goal is to open institutions, in our context, to migrant children, supporting teachers will mean not only helping them in the situation of working with students, but helping them to teach competencies for living in a multicultural world. This is not easy in a monocultural school and in the absence of training in intercultural education, little coverage of the issue in basic textbooks, and lack of political support (Markowska-Manista, Dąbrowa 2016).

As we mentioned at the beginning, these three levels – macro, meso and micro – overlap, together forming a set of factors that shape not only the situation of migrant children at school, but also the potential of the teaching staff in forming responses to the educational and social needs of migrant children.

## Methods of the study

The data presented in the article comes from the quantitative and qualitative study conducted within the CHILD-UP project. In our research we explored the topic of migrant children in the educational system from perspectives of three groups of respondents: children, parents, and professionals: teachers, cultural assistants and social workers. The research was conducted in two different locations that allowed us to capture the diversity of migrant children in terms of their status and the specificity of working with them: in a large city in the south of Poland characterized by a significant

influx of immigrants in recent years, and in the Lublin Province, where schools are attended mostly by refugee children from Centers for Foreigners. For the purposes of this article, the focus is on the results of the research conducted with teachers only.

The CHILD-UP project employed a mixed-methods approach where the quantitative and qualitative methods were equally important: the former aimed at capturing breadth (the general picture) while the latter – the depth (the thorough understanding gained thanks to explaining the result) of school experiences of migrant children. Such a design determines the choice of purposive sampling based on information-rich cases capturing both the diversity and similarities of teachers working with the migrant children. Teachers were selected in a purposeful way: an important criterion for the invitation to participate in the study was having experience of working with migrant children. This involved selecting the sample in a two-stage process: identifying schools with migrant children in the first stage, followed by recruiting teachers with considerable professional experience.

The quantitative research was conducted between June 2019 and September 2020 in schools attended by migrant children. The questionnaire was sent to 80 people working in the schools attended by migrant children: it was given directly to the respondents in the schools, as well as distributed by members of the stakeholder network (the "For the Earth" Association, the Nikolai Rej Foundation). There were 35 complete responses. The low response rate may have been due to the busy workload of teachers who not only have to complete coursework but are also burdened with a lot of administrative work. In addition, the broader context in which the quantitative research was conducted should be emphasized. First, in recent years, elementary and middle schools have been invited to participate in numerous educational and research projects that are seen as important for the school community and children's development, but which at the same time force changes in teaching schedules and require additional involvement from students and teachers. To avoid further burden on pupils and teachers, school principals declined to join the CHILD-UP project and the opportunity to implement the research in their schools. Second, the quantitative research was conducted after the April 2019 teachers' strike, wherein participants demanded not only an increase in their salaries but also changes in the education system. The striking teachers faced a lack of understanding and public criticism, which translated into their reluctance to participate in supplementary activities.

The quantitative research became the starting point for the qualitative research carried out between November and December 2020. 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers working in elementary schools, of which 10 interviews were conducted in schools in the large city and 6 interviews were conducted in the Lubelskie province. The interviewees were recruited through schools selected in the quantitative survey, as well as those identified by members of the researchers' stakeholder and contact networks. Due to the pandemic, most interviews were conducted by telephone or via online communication platforms. Although we were able to conduct the planned

number of qualitative interviews, the remote teaching introduced in schools during the pandemic period significantly hindered contact with the interviewees, who indicated exhaustion and overload of responsibilities. Interviews were sometimes rescheduled or interrupted several times due to respondents' work and home responsibilities.

The interviewees were a diverse group. For our research we invited elementary school teachers, all of whom had graduated from higher education institutions which correspond to the specificity of the subject they teach (early childhood education, curriculum subjects, Polish for foreigners). Among the research participants there were 15 women and 1 man with varying length of work experience: while the shortest length was about 10 years, the longest was about 37 years. Most of the interviewees taught subjects such as mathematics, history, civic education, music, geography or art (n=10), others worked as teachers of earlier education (n=5). It was possible to include teachers of Polish as a foreign language in the study (n=2), and one person who taught religion.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview script divided into thematic areas to be covered during the interview. Each time, however, the interview was adapted to the experience of the interviewees, their qualifications, the subject taught or their experience of working with migrant children, leaving the researchers free to choose the topics covered during the interview. The interview began with an opening question to gather information about the professional experience of the interviewees. This was followed by questions about the educational needs, expectations and aspirations of the migrant children, the impact of the school and school environment on the children's education and the support offered by the school to the migrant children. The interview also aimed to explore the experiences of teachers working with migrant children by highlighting challenges, barriers or achievements they have met in their work. Another area related to migrant children's relationships with their peers and teachers' cooperation with parents. The interview closed with questions about recommendations for possible improvements in the integration and participation of migrant children in the education system.

Both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of social research. Research participants were provided with information about the study, as well as how the collected material would be used and its voluntary nature.

## **Research results**

### **Difficulties experienced and ways of coping – the quantitative study**

Although the collected data comes from a small sample and cannot be generalised to the whole population of teachers, it allows for the mapping of some difficulties and challenges experienced by teachers working in schools with migrant and refugee pupils. Essentially all of the difficult situations listed in the questionnaire were

marked by the respondents, reflecting the complexity of teachers' work with the migrant child. Challenges related to communication in Polish language (n=29) were mentioned as experienced often or on a regular basis. The importance of language barriers is also confirmed by other studies conducted in Poland (Kościółek, 2020). Importantly, none of the teachers in the qualitative study omitted this issue either, regardless of the specifics of the migrant pupil. Teachers also mentioned problems that result from migrants' mobility, i.e., changing their place of residence (n=26), joining a class in the middle of the school year (n=19), which generates difficulties in establishing relationships with other students (n=22), manifesting one's reasons in a conflict situation (n=17) or talking about learning difficulties (n=13). Problems resulting from personal circumstances (n=9) were indicated relatively rarely, which does not confirm that children do not experience these kinds of challenges, as was revealed in the qualitative research, but rather that they are discussed and solved within their families or that children do not want to manifest them in school due to anxieties related to family situations. Another explanation could be related to teachers' capacity to recognise students' mental health problems. As other research confirms, teachers tend to focus on academic achievements and educational developments of migrant pupils, while usually remain less aware of their psychological problems. (Margari et al. 2013). In the Polish context this could be due to being overloaded with various responsibilities at work, which was often mentioned by interviewees.

The research confirmed that there are three main ways in which problems were discovered: by the teachers themselves, the children, and their parents. Other actors e.g. psychologists, social workers or mediators were not indicated by the respondents. The data thus document teachers' agency and sensitivity in discovering children's problems and solving them. This is reflected in the title of the paper – teachers manage themselves or rather rely on their own competences and skills acquired from school practice. Problematic situations were noticed by the respondents themselves (n=29) or shared by other teachers (n=22). Difficulties were also revealed by the children themselves (n=34 – a child asked for help themselves or another child asked for help). We can interpret this fact to some extent as indicating trust between students and teachers and experiencing safety in school relations. The third important actors mentioned by respondents are children's parents (n=12). Significantly, teachers do not indicate involvement of the out-of-school environment. When facing challenging situations teachers collaborate mostly with their colleagues – other teachers (n=25), parents (n=19) or school management and other members of school staff (in cases both n=16). Again, the most uncommon is looking for help or collaboration outside the school. This solution is chosen only in such situations as aggressive behaviours or accidents in school.

The respondents were also asked how they deal with key issues relating to challenges in the classroom, cultural diversity, children's cooperation, and sensitization to cultural stereotypes. None of the teachers indicated that they do not cope with these issues.

Self-assessment of their own competence is thus relatively high. Teachers seem to be quite sure that they can overcome specific challenges in their work (n=14 an answer “a lot” and n=20 “quite a bit”). They are also strongly convinced that they are able to reduce ethnic stereotyping amongst students. There are more doubts regarding the adaptation of the cultural diversity of students and raising awareness for cultural differences amongst students (n=4; answers “to some extent”). When we take into account the fact that most of the respondents did not indicate having access to intercultural education trainings, it seems that high the self-evaluation of their own coping skills could be interpreted as appreciation of one’s own involvement in developing solutions from the bottom up. We will return to this issue while discussing results from the qualitative part of the study.

The quantitative research also covered issues related to how teachers perceived their relationship with students and to what extent they supported children’s initiative and agency in school. In terms of evaluating their own role, teachers presented themselves in the role of “facilitators” of agency in children, the role of key others in building children’s subjectivity, appreciating their skills and sensitivity. Respondents framed their role as an important trigger of agency. The most common methods used by them in the classroom are: encouraging children to discuss during class activities and asking questions (n=24), supporting children’s initiatives (which means supporting their autonomy and agency; n=24) and supporting children’s creativity and encouraging them to use innovative thinking (also helping in implementation if possible; n=25).

## **Competence, agency and self-evaluation – the qualitative study**

The qualitative research presents a more complex and often contrasting picture of teachers’ experiences which form a continuum of attitudes towards teaching migrant pupils. Among various visions on how to include migrant students to the educational system, there is a belief that in principle this is not an unusual, extraordinary situation, and pupils with a migrant background are just children like the rest of the class. As a consequence, no additional measures have to be implemented in teaching.

You know what, honestly I didn’t see any difference. Even more so that we are dealing with integration all the time. At the beginning I said pupils that we have children from different countries, that they need our help. But for kids it was something obvious that there were new peers. You know, if they didn’t speak Polish, it would be more difficult for them. By they were accepted, now Polish kids play with them normally. At least in my class there was no problem with integration (PL\_T16\_F)

Although teachers expressing such an approach recognise possible language and communication problems as a challenge and see the need for support, with regard

to relations in the classroom they rather omit the aspect of ethnicity and migration experience and tend to emphasise that: *It is a matter of personality, it is not a matter of migration* (PL\_T7\_F). Even if they notice offensive nicknames or insults related to ethnicity that are used by children from time to time, they believe that a quick and decisive reaction from the teacher is sufficient. Teasing is typical for children of a certain age regardless of their background, and usually migrant children integrate quickly into the class group.

It is this age when teasing happens because it is fun. It is not related to their ethnicity, although there are situations where someone says in anger "you Russian". Immediately the teachers react and this situation is reported to me and we talk. But such teasing is also among children from Poland. (PL\_T7\_F)

I think the kids really welcomed them... they integrated with the whole group, so to speak. There is no division that they are from Ukraine... they are treated equally as other children (PL\_T7\_F)

This way of perceiving school relations, however, stems from two premises. Firstly, the majority of our interviewees taught the youngest children in grades I-III (ISCED1) in which relationships between children are established faster. Free play (e.g. respondents pointed to time at a day-care centre) provides more opportunities for this: *It's about doing many things together. Getting to know each other. To play together* (PL\_T12\_F). Secondly, these statements were characteristic for teachers from a large city where, firstly, a significant number of foreign students came from culturally close Ukraine and, secondly, there were still not too many of them in single classes and schools. In the case of pupils from older classes or from schools where children from Centers for Foreigners were studying, so there were more of them, or children coming from culturally more distant countries, the experiences and attitudes of teachers were already more varied. They pointed out the initial separation of migrant children and negative reactions up to racist aggressive behaviors. In such narratives school relations were perceived by respondents as more complex and challenging. Interviewees pointed to possible conflicts between pupils, sometimes related to cultural differences and stereotypes.

There was a girl from Ukraine in the 4th grade. They teased her for no reason, beat her, kicked her. Last year a girl from an African country came and she also caused a shock because she is of a different color. Racist behavior appeared. There have been several such situations. We reacted very quickly to them, including the fact that we threatened to report it somewhere and it calmed down. She knew how to defend herself but she has a different problem. She doesn't speak Polish. (PL\_T15\_F)

Relations with friends were totally different. In the past refugee children used to spend time in their own groups, they didn't assimilate with other children, with us. They had this belief that this particular school is only one of many stops on their way. The approach was totally different then as well. (PL\_T4\_F)

The children arrived in 2008. Initially, the attitude to the fact that there would be foreign children, and we knew they were Muslim... the attitude towards them was unfavorable, not to say hostile. (PL\_T5\_M)

Despite the fact that, as indicated in the quantitative research, teachers rated their competence in dealing with difficulties in working with migrant children quite highly, in the interviews they emphasized that they did not have the opportunity to participate in trainings that would help them prepare for their first contact with migrant or refugee children, provide knowledge on how to support their adaptation process. In their narratives, the interviewees clearly pointed out insufficient support in expanding their own qualifications when it came to training on working with migrant children. This problem was mentioned both by teachers working in schools where migrant and refugee children have been present for several years, and where their presence is a result of the last few years.

If they don't understand Polish, how can I interest them with another language? What methods should I use? I needed more materials, experience, cultural knowledge, help. We tried to teach to answer all groups' needs: so that our children [Polish] wouldn't lose out and the new ones learn as well. Now it's good that there is internet, you can search for something. (PL\_T13\_F)

Faced with insufficient systemic support when a migrant or refugee child arrives, teachers used strategies to improve their competencies individually, which is also confirmed by the results of the quantitative survey. Self-investment and engagement in improving individual skills might be crucial to explain why in the context of evident lack of institutional support in gaining essential competences, they evaluate their "know-how" quite positively.

We started teaching without any former training, because no one instructed us at schools, no one trained teachers. I myself voluntarily took the initiative of teaching Polish as a foreign language, because it is a challenge. (...) On the part of state institutions there was no step [in our direction], only a 2-day training for teachers, which I did not attend. (PL\_T5\_M)

I had to dedicate an entire training conference to this, one gentleman came to us, because teachers don't understand at all what it's like to work with such children, to show them that it's really difficult for these children, and they have to imagine that a child who comes here is not only alienated, has no friends, no peers, speaks in the language of the family, practically speaking would like to do many things, but unfortunately there is one failure after another. And in order to understand this, especially your Polish teachers, who did not understand it, imagine how to explain "Pan Tadeusz" to a girl from Sub-Saharan Africa. (PL\_T7\_F)

With the offer to broaden their competences, the interviewees particularly appreciate participating in trainings that enable them to explore the issue of cultural

diversity, to understand the challenges migrant children face upon arrival in a new country, their integration and the role of the school in supporting this process. Such trainings, even if not very accessible, become a turning point for the participants of our study, making their work not only based on their "personal experience, intuition" (PL\_T16\_F), as well as creating a safe space to exchange experiences, knowledge and insights from working with migrant children. As one interviewee highlights:

I was at a training course in Lublin. It was a workshop at our facility. This training in Lublin lasted six months. However, we benefited more from the fact that there were people from different schools attended by foreign children. We were able to exchange our experiences, we were able to get some ideas from each other, so that we could function more easily. (PL\_T12\_F)

The sense of individual responsibility for finding strategies for dealing with the situation of migrant children at school is evident not only in the context of expanding one's own knowledge, but also in the ways of working with migrant children. The participants of the research pointed out the lack of teaching materials adapted to the education of pupils coming from abroad. The responsibility of preparing or developing such materials is thus shifted on teachers.

We [authors' note – teachers who work with migrant children] do a double job – preparing materials for Polish children and for Chechen children. Teachers from other schools are aware of this. They say we're working very hard. We do much more than if there were only Polish children, because we lack tools, worksheets. (PL\_T14\_F)

The process of educating migrant children becomes even more difficult when they do not have sufficient language competence. Often these situations necessitate communication and preparation of materials in a language familiar to both the pupils and those teaching them. While teachers from schools located close to the Centre for Foreigners in this context stressed the usefulness of their knowledge of Russian, teachers from schools located in a large city referred primarily to the use of English.

Qualitative research therefore provides a more in-depth picture of teacher agency. With limited access to widely understood resources that can support them in their daily work, teachers use the skills available to them: language skills (most often Russian or English), their own materials prepared to better present the context of the topic at hand (especially in the case of teaching history and Polish), visual materials to help students understand meanings and concepts.

For him it is difficult because he does not know the historical context, I give him a smaller range of material. At the beginning it was even learning by heart, now I can see that he understands more, we use mind maps, work with source texts, but vocabulary is difficult even for children from Poland. (PL\_T8\_F)

The respondents also mentioned their agency in the context of organizational and administrative undertakings, pointing out that despite legal regulations, in order to support their pupils e.g. in examinations, they try to find out about and organize as many adaptations for migrant pupils as possible. Such efforts are not always successful. They show, however, on the one hand, that the educational system is not very flexible when it comes to the needs of children with a migrant background (exam accommodations are regulated from the top down) and, on the other hand, that bottom-up attempts to navigate the requirements and constraints faced by teachers and their pupils make it possible to express their own agency.

We wanted to help [name of a child] with the 8th grade exam. I even called the director of the district exam commission and he informed me that there is no such possibility. She has to write this exam [in Polish]. There will only be an extension on her time and a Polish-English Dictionary ...We are in the process of organizing a bilingual school for her, but if she passes the exam at the level she will pass, and we assume she will pass at a low level, no good, reputable high school will accept her. (PL\_T7\_F)

When working with refugee children, the role of integration-oriented projects at school was more often emphasized. Teachers stressed the importance of events which provide an opportunity to build a sense of community and belonging, in which all students participate. Such projects were seen by the teaching staff as a tool developed over the years for coping with challenges at work and an expression of their own agency. Additionally, some schools appoint special teams that are responsible for shaping the local integration policy towards foreign children at school level.

We have a special team for refugee issues, we undertake various activities to work on relations between our Polish children and refugee children. Because if we get to know their culture there will be a chance to solve problems, barriers. We already know our culture, when refugee children get to know it then we will have a chance to solve problems. (PL\_T4\_F)

How do the teachers perceive their own actions? In addition to, as they put it, daily work and support, they pay attention to reinforcing positive behavior, as in the case of the boy who stood up for a student who was kicked by another student:

At one point I heard – stop kicking her. And I ran out quickly and this poor Sonia (from Ukraine) was standing in the corner, someone was kicking her. I took this boy who reacted and praised him so much. The director printed a diploma and we just publicized that he defended that girl because there were a lot of people in the corridor. Everyone would like to get such a diploma, so they just saw how cool it is. His dad was so happy too. And this was fourth grade, and they also wanted someone to praise them. The perpetrator was one person from a difficult family, so I think that these are patterns transferred from home, because how can a child be a racist in the fourth grade? (PL\_T15\_F)

Affirmation of positive attitudes also appeared in the statements of teachers teaching refugee children, with an additional focus on avoiding stereotypical judgments and labelling of children. What is noteworthy, however, is the focus primarily on their own actions. Teachers emphasised: *there will be more and more children of this type, so we need to prepare for it* (PL\_T7\_F), however, there were no statements assuming external support in this task, no such expectations were visible, the work must be done "with our own hands".

## Conclusions

In this article we focus on the experiences of teachers working with migrant pupils. The results presented above clearly show that a significant element shaping the current school system is teacher agency. Both in the case of those educators who work with refugee children and those who work mainly with migrant pupils, taking one's own initiative, creating grassroots projects, trying to cope with administrative requirements are everyday experiences of the interviewees. This is also confirmed in relation to distance learning and the pandemic context. In relation to the pandemic period, teachers emphasised the need to individually search for solutions to facilitate online work with students.

Our research shows, on the one hand, insufficient systemic support for teachers teaching migrant and refugee children and shifting the responsibility for expanding their knowledge and competencies in the area of educational work with foreign children onto them. On the other hand, teachers appreciate the support they receive thanks to solutions enshrined in law: the possibility to employ a cultural assistant, additional hours of Polish language, additional hours of remedial classes. The scope and type of external support depends primarily on previous experience in working with migrant and refugee children. While statutory support is widely used in schools with refugee children, in schools in large cities knowledge about possible support is slowly being gained, leading to gradual implementation of solutions offered by state policies. Interestingly, in the case of schools with a majority of migrant children, these solutions are most often applied when there is a child who speaks a language that does not belong to the family of Slavic languages (most often coming from a non-European country). In such situations, it is particularly important to have a cultural assistant who supports teachers by acting as a translator during lessons and in contacts with parents, preparing teaching materials in the mother tongue of pupils. Many of our interviewees – regardless of their place of work – also mentioned the support of a psychologist and an educator, and in the school attended by refugee children – a team for refugee children.

Relating our research results to the presented theoretical framework including macro, meso and micro levels of analysis, it is worthwhile to look at each of these

perspectives separately. The level of migration and education policies rarely appeared directly in the narratives, however, teachers in their reflections often referred to the framework of their activities – legal regulations, financial constraints, administrative requirements and assessment criteria. The system as such was rarely seen by them as a source of support. Although the solutions of additional Polish language hours or a position of a cultural assistant in school were considered important, the tools directly addressed to the teachers themselves were less frequently referred to. The system was perceived rather as inflexible, forcing additional activities on the part of teachers. Although available solutions were appreciated, some teachers teaching in schools in a big city pointed to insufficient access to information about the possibilities of their implementation. The meso level also featured most frequently in the narratives indirectly. In terms of the immediate school environment, NGOs are an important actor, offering support to teachers and schools. However, in many cases the possibility of implementing a given solution at school depended on the financial capacity of local communities.

The micro level revealed that the first and primary source of support for teachers is the school itself. In case of any difficulties or challenges, it was the teachers themselves and those working in the school that became the social space for working out solutions together. This becomes particularly evident in the context of schools located close to centers for foreigners. Here the metaphor of ‘doing everything with your own hands’ is particularly telling. Teachers’ narratives are focused on a past “without anything” – without materials, knowledge, skills, know-how, and on the present with developed methods of working with refugee pupils, projects that involve all pupils, mechanisms of cooperation with parents, etc.

All these three levels form a complex picture of the experiences of the group studied. However, the coping capacities and agency are to large extent reactive responses – the teachers’ narratives show that most tools are developed in response to a problem. An inclusive or open school requires not only proactive actions by the teaching staff, but above all a transparent and supportive education and migration policy that creates a framework for educational activities with migrant children.

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