



**Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue  
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**

## Local report (Poland)

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How do you feel about school? Local report of  
interviews with children, and professionals on their  
school experiences

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## Introduction

This report is based on templates for local reports about professionals' and children's perspectives which has been delivered by UJ for use by the partners in the research activities. Each partner has prepared and delivered two local reports, about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives. Draft versions of the two final reports (about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives) has been prepared and circulated among the project partners by UJ for reviewing. The revisions have been introduced in the deliverable regarding local reports. This report is divided in two parts, according to the differentiation between professionals and children. The final report (D. 5.2) will include a reflection on the data presented in this report and on the most important results emerging from the local reports.

The report included a methodological overview, followed by sections for each part of the two general sections (professionals' perspectives and children's perspectives). The section on professionals is organised, for each country partner, according to the views of different professional (teachers, social workers and mediators) about professional experiences, in general and for what concerns narratives on and relationships with migrant children and their families, the experience of pandemic and finally the recommendation for good practices. The section on children is organised, for each partner, in thematic subsections about the experience of schools, intercultural relations at school, identity and belonging, and final recommendations.

## CHILD-UP WP5 local professional report: Poland

### 1. Introduction

In this report we present the results of WP5 of the CHILD-UP project. It encompasses the qualitative data gathered during interviews (both individual and FGI) with professionals: teachers, social workers and intercultural assistants.<sup>1</sup> We discuss their educational background, the scope of their duties and experience of working with migrant children and their families.

Three locations were chosen to gather the data for WP5 (as for WP6) and were mostly the continuation of the cooperation established in WP4. We conducted fieldwork in a large city (1 million inhabitants), with the majority of economic migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In this case, migrant children compose a minority of pupils at schools, constituting 2% of students in primary schools. The other two locations are small towns in the eastern part of Poland, located near centres for foreigners, where refugee families are accommodated. Migrant children in the schools constitute a majority of pupils in one of these two towns and a significant number in schools in the other. Migrant children in those schools originate mainly from Chechnya and neighbouring post-Soviet republics. These two distinct fieldsites allowed us to investigate various communities within which migrant children live and the way persons engaged in direct work with migrant children respond to this challenge.

### 2. Methods of the study

In line with the methodological approach foreseen in the project, the research was conducted in the same locations as Work Package 4: in an urban area in the southern part of Poland (large city) and in small communities / towns located close to the centre for foreigners. We invited professionals from the institutions and organizations already involved in the project, but also new institutions were approached. While teachers were recruited through the schools they work in, social workers were approached through the stakeholders: either CSWC in the large city or the NGO “Stowarzyszenie dla Ziemi” in the case of small communities / towns. In both cases, the contact was initiated with the head of the institution who assisted us in contacting professionals who have had experience with working with migrant children and/or families. To reach intercultural assistants, we used the support of the “Fundacja Wspierania Kultury I Języka Polskiego” Foundation which provides training for intercultural assistants in one of the research sites. This foundation sent out invitation to our project and helped to recruit intercultural assistants for focus group interviews.

The research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a huge impact on the recruitment of interviewees and the research process. Although all of the approached institutions were interested in the CHILD-UP project and we met with a positive response to our invitation to participate in the research, the recruitment process was long, and it was difficult to get in contact and recruit interview persons. During that time, all three groups of professionals: teacher, social workers and cultural assistants were dealing with a greater workload and the reorganization of their work due to the closure of schools and the requirements of social distancing, which made engaging in the project difficult. This was especially challenging in case of professionals working in the Centre for Foreigners which led us to pursue an alternative strategy, replacing focus group interviews in the Centre for Foreigners with two individual interviews. To provide a broader picture of the situation of migrant children in the education system, we conducted a focus group interview with a new actor - not foreseen in the project – namely professionals

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<sup>1</sup> In this report we use the term “intercultural assistant” for professionals supporting the integration of migrant children in schools. In the literature this position is also referred as a “cultural assistant” or “(cultural) mediator”.

working in a Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre for Children. Finally, as COVID-19 also influenced the daily work of professionals, a new section in the research guidelines was added to discuss the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers were recruited from three schools in the urban area (9 interviews) and two schools in small communities/towns (8 interviews). In addition, a focus group interview with 5 professionals working in a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre for children was carried out in the large city. They are formally hired as teachers, but they represent a whole spectrum of specialists who work with children with learning disabilities and developmental disorders, including pedagogues, speech therapists, neurological speech therapists, and psychologists. They deal with psychological-educational and speech therapy diagnosis and are independent of the school, often playing an advisory, supportive role for children, parents and teachers. They issue opinions that include recommendations on the need for assistance at school, adaptation of requirements, as well as special education certificates. This group of professionals recognize the challenges children face at different levels: educational and linguistic functioning and socio-emotional functioning. Altogether, we interviewed 22 teachers, among these there were 17 individual interviews carried out remotely via phone or online communication platforms with teachers working in primary schools. In the case of social workers, we conducted 9 interviews: 8 respondents work in different branches of the CSWC in the large city, 1 person is a social worker in the Centre for Foreigners. A focus group interview was conducted with intercultural assistants working in various schools. An overview of the number of interviews divided by professional category is available in Table 1 and the detailed description of interviewees and their professional experience is presented in the chapter entitled “Participant backgrounds”.

*TABLE 1. NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS/ FOCUS GROUPS WITH PROFESSIONALS*

| Teachers<br>Interviews/<br>focus group interviews                                                                          | Social workers<br>Individual<br>interviews | Reception<br>Centres<br>Individual<br>interviews | Intercultural<br>assistants<br>focus group<br>interviews |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 17 individual interviews;<br>1 FGI in psychological and<br>pedagogical counselling centre<br>for children (5 participants) | 8                                          | 2                                                | 1 FGI (7<br>participants)                                |

The interviews with teachers, social workers and intercultural assistants were carried out between October and December 2020 and the focus group interview in the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre for children took place in March 2021. Due to restrictions related to the pandemic, most interviews were conducted remotely - either via telephone or online communication platforms. We experienced no problems in obtaining consent for this form of research, but it does have limitations: we could not see the interviewee and recognise non-verbal signals. We might have interrupted our interlocutor or too quickly ask another question. While talking to our interlocutors, we could hear that some of them were working remotely from home and struggling to find a quiet space to give an interview. All of the interviewed professionals received information letter about the project and consent forms. The researchers made sure that the interview did not cause additional stress for the interviewees and that their comfort and privacy were important. The time and type of contact were adjusted to interviewees' needs and possibilities. The interviews typically lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, with only few exceeding this time up to 90 minutes or 2

hours. All interviews were recorded, and grids were prepared based on the interviews. MAXQDA 2020 software was used for the analysis of data.

### 3. Professional experiences – an overview

#### Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff

Most teachers working in schools have extensive working experience. The average length of service is 19 years. However, many of the interviewed teachers have been working for 30 years or longer, and only 2 teachers for 5 or fewer years. The vocational experience of professionals working in the counselling centre varies from very experienced to persons entering professional work.

The sample is characterised by a high level of education. All the teachers completed higher education, mostly holding an MA in at least one field: apart from the main field of study e.g. mathematics or history, they graduated from other studies like early teaching, philosophy, teaching Polish as a foreign language. Many teachers completed postgraduate courses, including geography, philosophy, education management, or teaching Polish as a foreign language. Teachers from the counselling centre mostly hold pedagogical and psychological degrees, and had completed additional training in multicultural mediation, teaching Polish as a foreign language or therapeutic courses.

There is almost no anti-discrimination or intercultural training included in the pedagogical studies. However, our interviewees took part in several courses on working with foreign children either organized by the city council, NGOs, by school principals or at the Pedagogical University in Krakow. In this context, teachers underlined the rarity of such trainings which would improve their qualifications in working with migrant children. In 3 cases, teachers had completed postgraduate courses on working with migrant children. These are Polish language teachers who completed postgraduate courses in teaching Polish as a foreign language. It is usually on their own initiative that they chose to improve their skills after a few years of working with migrant children: “We started teaching with no former training, because no one instructed us at schools, no one trained teachers. I voluntarily took the initiative of teaching Polish as a foreign language because it is a challenge” (PL\_T4\_F).

The teachers work in public schools which vary in terms of location, their total number of pupils as well as the presence of migrant children. One can distinguish two types of schools. Eight teachers work in rather small schools in two small towns, near the centres for foreigners, with a high percentage of migrant children (more than half of the pupils in one of them). The refugee centres were established in the early 2000s, so the schools have about 20 years of experience in working with migrant children. Most of the migrant children come originally from post-Soviet countries in Central Asia and usually communicate in Russian. In these schools, classes are small (6-10 children) and some consist only of migrant children. Teachers underlined the usefulness of the knowledge of Russian, which is common among older teachers (learning Russian was obligatory in all stages of education during state socialism), which allows them to communicate with pupils and their parents. The other type of school, where 8 teachers work, is public primary school in a large city. These are bigger schools (about 500 pupils). In these schools there are few migrant pupils per school (ranging from 5 to 20). Pupils mostly come from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Teachers rarely mentioned the presence of children from Africa, Turkey or other countries and regions. Migrant pupils were seldom present until about 2015 in these schools. Only recently has the number of migrant children started to grow.

There are also two teachers who work outside of the formal education system, either additionally to their main workplace or as their main occupational activity, teaching Polish as a foreign language children and adults. One of them used to work as Polish language teacher in primary school, however later moved into the field of adult education, organising courses for foreigners in Polish. Only two years ago the school

principal invited her to teach Polish language to migrant children at her school for a couple of hours a week. The other teacher cooperates with governmental agencies like the Office for Foreigners and mostly teaches Polish to refugees coming to Poland. She also works in the refugee centre.

Five professionals from the counselling centre have also extensive experience of working with migrant children whose present a significant number of children under the supervision of the centre because of the difficulties at the school are connected to a language barrier or psychological stress connected to adaptation problems. The professionals in the centre work with children of different ages, from kindergarten to 18 years old.

Most of the teachers we interviewed work in primary schools, which encompasses ICSED 1 and ICSED 2 levels (children ages 7-15), one of them also teaches in secondary school (ISCED 3), two have experience as kindergarten teachers. Teachers working in early childhood education (classes 1-3, age 7-10) work with one class only, and they are both subject teachers and head of class. They conduct most of the classes for a single class in subjects like Polish language, math, nature, science, society, music, art. In those cases, teachers have intensive contact with children, including migrant children if they are in the class. Their role is crucial in child's integration and education. On the other hand, teachers working with older classes (4-8, age 10-15) teach a specific subject. They might have contact with pupils from a class every day (in the case of maths or Polish language, for example) or once to twice a week (in the case of other subjects like history, geography, physics, biology, sport etc). Some teachers are the form tutor of a class. The form tutor plays an important role in integrating migrant children since she/he is a tutor, who mediates between the pupil and other teachers, helping to solve any problems that arise at school. Also, parents mostly contact the head of class in any matters connected to school. In this case they also meet with children once a week during a "social class", serving as a kind of community meeting where current issues are discussed.

Two of the interviewed teachers have experience of working as school principals. One used to be the school principal in a small town near a refugee centre for several years. The other has been the school principal in the large city for 4 years. They were both very engaged in educating teachers working in their schools on the needs of migrant children. They organised special seminars for teachers to educate them about the context of migration and the special needs of migrant pupils. The principal from the urban school educates herself on how to support migrant children and regularly takes part in conferences organised by the city council on intercultural education. She also engaged an intercultural assistant for migrant children at her school.

**TABLE 2 CAREER AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS**

|    | Subject of teaching/professional experience | Years of working as a teacher | Working with children/families with a migration background                                                                                                                                                                    | languages | Location                        | ISCED/grades                              |
|----|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Polish as a foreign language                | 4                             | Conducting courses for adults and children of different ages and implementing courses in cooperation with the Office for Foreigners, as well as with other organisations which organised Polish language classes for children | Polish    | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/4-8 grades non-formal education |



|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                          |                                 |                      |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                            | and adults in the Centre for Foreigners                                                                                                                                                                                              |                          |                                 |                      |
| 2. | Early childhood education                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 14                                         | Head of class with two children from Ukraine daily                                                                                                                                                                                   | Polish                   | Large city                      | ISCED 1/1-3 grades   |
| 3. | Early childhood education with music                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 25                                         | Head of class with a migrant child from Turkey, used to have children from Ukraine in class                                                                                                                                          | Polish                   | Large city                      | 1-3 grades           |
| 4. | English language                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | 15                                         | Works on a daily basis with migrant children from Chechnya, Ukraine, Polish children coming back from migration.<br><br>Mostly Chechen children from the refugee centre.<br><br>Head of class teacher with two pupils from Chechnya. | Polish, English          | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades |
| 5. | Polish language, history, music, knowledge about society (WOS), English<br><br>MA in philosophy<br><br>Postgraduate course in education management<br><br>Polish as a foreign language postgraduate course<br><br>Worked as a school principal | 35                                         | Has been working with migrant children mostly from post-soviet countries since 2008.<br><br>Mostly Chechen children from the refugee centre.<br><br>Head of class teacher in Poland who has only Chechen children.                   | Polish, English, Russian | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades |
| 6. | Polish language, Polish language as a foreign language                                                                                                                                                                                         | 2001-2011 primary school – Polish language | Used to be head of class with children from Ukraine (early education).<br><br>School principal with 10 migrant children.                                                                                                             | Polish, English          | Large city                      | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades |



|     |                                                                                              |                                                       |                                                                                                                                  |                          |                                 |                                    |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|     |                                                                                              | 2019 – Polish as a foreign language in primary school |                                                                                                                                  |                          |                                 |                                    |
| 7.  | Physical education                                                                           | 27                                                    | Works with migrant children from Ukraine or Belarus daily.                                                                       | Polish                   | Large city                      | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades               |
| 8.  | Early childhood education<br>Postgraduate course in education management<br>School principal | 30                                                    | Work daily with migrant children from Ukraine, Nigeria, Russia, Belarus.                                                         | Polish                   | Large city                      | ISCED 1/1-3 grades                 |
| 9.  | History, German language                                                                     | 14                                                    | Works with children from Ukraine, Russia and Turkey daily.<br><br>Classroom teacher with one migrant boy.                        | Polish, German           | Large city                      | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades               |
| 10. | English language, Art, Technology, Kindergarten education                                    | 5                                                     | Work daily with migrant children from Ukraine, Nigeria, Russia, Belarus.<br><br>Mostly Chechen children from the refugee centre. | Polish, English, Russian | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 0-2/Kindergarten, 1-8 grades |
| 11. | Polish as a foreign language, philosophy and ethics                                          | 17                                                    | Works daily with children from Ukraine, Belarus and Turkey.                                                                      | Polish                   | Large city                      | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades               |
| 12. | early childhood education, geography                                                         | 15                                                    | Works with migrant children since 10 years. Mostly Chechen children from the refugee centre                                      | Polish, English          | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades               |



|     |                                                  |          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                 |                                 |                               |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 13. | Polish language, after school education          | 31       | Works with many migrant children daily. Mostly Chechen children from the refugee centre.<br><br>Classroom teacher with three pupils from Chechnya. Also children from Kurdistan, Ukraine, Polish children returning from abroad. | Polish, Russian | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 2                       |
| 14. | English Language                                 | 10       | Classroom teacher with four pupils from Chechnya.<br><br>Work with migrant children daily, Belarus, Chechnya.                                                                                                                    | Polish, Russian | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/4-8 grades          |
| 15. | Math, early childhood education                  | 30       | Works with migrant children daily.<br><br>Classroom teacher with one pupil from Chechnya.                                                                                                                                        | Polish, Russian | Small town, near refugee centre | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades          |
| 16. | English Language                                 | n/a      | Works with migrant children daily.                                                                                                                                                                                               | Polish, English | Large city                      | ISCED 1-2/1-8 grades          |
| 17. | Early childhood education                        | 37 years | Classroom teacher with migrant kids.<br><br>Works with migrant pupils daily .                                                                                                                                                    | Polish          | Large city                      | ISCED 1/1-3 grades            |
| 18. | Pedagogue, Polish language as a foreign language | n/a      | Works with migrant children daily.                                                                                                                                                                                               | Polish          | Large city                      | Counseling centre, all grades |
| 19. | speech therapist, neurologist                    | 18       | Works with migrant children daily.                                                                                                                                                                                               | Polish          | Large city                      | Counseling centre, all grades |



|     |                                        |    |                                    |        |            |                               |
|-----|----------------------------------------|----|------------------------------------|--------|------------|-------------------------------|
| 20. | psychologist                           | 2  | Works with migrant children daily. | Polish | Large city | Counseling centre, all grades |
| 21. | psychologist                           | 3  | Works with migrant children daily. | Polish | Large city | Counseling centre, all grades |
| 22. | Pedagogue, multiculturalism specialist | 25 | Works with migrant children daily. | Polish | Large city | Counseling centre, all grades |

### Social Workers

The social workers we spoke with are mostly women (there was one man in the sample) and are Polish. The duration of their experience varies from 4 to 30 years. They work in the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in one of the largest cities in Poland, apart for one person who works in the CSWC in a small town near the centre for foreigners.

All of the interviewed social workers have higher education which results from the legal regulations of the profession in Poland. Most of them hold an MA in social work, and one person holds MA in psychology. Only one professional took part in several training courses: intercultural communication, training on working with victims of sexual violence among migrants, and sexual violence against children.

Usually, the social workers we spoke to are fluent in a foreign language, either English or Russian, and their knowledge of a foreign language was usually the rationale as to why migrants were assigned to them. However, without special language training, they usually communicate on a basic level and this can cause difficulties in communication. Especially challenging in this regard is working with migrants who do not speak Russian or English and with whom communication is significantly hindered. Unfortunately, the CSWC does not hire interpreters which puts a burden on social workers who usually have to manage communication in a foreign language by themselves.

There are two types of positions that our interviewees hold: social workers and family assistants. Social workers work with all kinds of persons and their duties range from administrative work connected with applications for social benefits, through dealing with domestic violence, working with those misusing substances, directing persons to social welfare facilities. However, the proportions between office work and field work differ. The duties of a family assistant are much more precisely defined: they work with families and focus their attention on the well-being of the child. Their work includes assisting in the education of children and contact with schools, support in the upbringing of children, dealing with violence or other offences. Most of the social workers share field work with office work. They often work in special task teams, comprising a social worker, family assistant, and sometimes a psychologist or police officer, and who discuss particular cases of families together.



Social workers from the large city highlighted the limitations of their experience with migrant families. They stressed that there had not been much contact to date (most of them have only worked with 1-3 families) but they also underlined that the number of migrant families has been growing in recent years and they are encountering such cases more frequently as a result. Moreover, they stressed the unique aspects of their professional experience: they only work with families which are in difficult socio-economic situations and which need to apply for financial benefits, or require help in settling their legal situation. Social workers also deal with families which have experienced court or police interventions (e.g., due to domestic violence) and are subject to the so called "blue card" procedure, i.e., observation, supervision and help in changing domestic violence situations. Importantly, the cooperation with the social welfare centre is limited in time. Similarly, collaboration between social workers and other institutions (such as schools, healthcare, courts) also only occurs in problematic situations. Only the social worker in towns close to the centre for foreigners had wide experience and knowledge about the situation of migrant families, but in this case, they concern refugees.

The areas of intervention by social workers with migrant persons or families include:

- obtaining social benefits
- help during quarantine
- children's psychological problems
- individual integration programs
- help with legalising stays in Poland and getting documents
- psychological support for families with trauma
- adaptation of children at school
- crisis intervention (homelessness, violence)
- cultural conflicts within families where parents originate from different countries
- difficult situations with children – peer violence
- redirecting migrants to other institutions
- help in obtaining a job
- negligence of children
- assistance for victims of trafficking
- counselling families.

### Intercultural assistants

The professional background of intercultural assistants is very diverse and corresponds to the different life trajectories of the mediators and often their personal history of migration. Among the participants of the FGI, 5 work professionally as intercultural assistants, 2 are volunteers, one works as a librarian in a primary school and serves as a supporting person at this school, the other is engaged with the Vietnamese Association in Krakow. The 5 professionals in the sample who migrated to Poland knew Polish prior to coming to Poland.

All of the intercultural assistants have a higher education, most of them are constantly working on developing professional skills by taking part in various training and postgraduate courses. Four of our interlocutors earned their degrees in Ukraine, but in various fields. Two have a major in a subject relevant to the role of intercultural assistants, namely linguistics and pedagogy, and pedagogy in history (this person studies also teaching Polish language as foreign at a Polish university). Among the other two educated in Ukraine, one has a major in engineering studies, and the other one in agriculture, and is also engaged in completing the course on teaching Polish as foreign language at a Polish university. Professionals who

completed their vocational training in Poland had graduated from various fields: Polish philology, technical studies, research information.

Intercultural assistants who had not taken a special course in teaching and/or intercultural education voiced their willingness to complete such a training. The fee for such a course, however, exceeds their financial capacities and the schools where they are employed are not willing to cover such costs. The intercultural assistants interviewed underlined the importance of studying language teaching and underlined their desire for professional development. All respondents have participated in the numerous courses for mediators conducted by non-governmental organizations and the City Council program scheme. Participation in training sessions and seminars shows the importance they attach to improving their qualifications in the field of intercultural work. They also refer to their own experience and their own sensitivity when working with migrant children.

The position of intercultural assistants is not well established and the awareness of existing such a position is not widespread. The organization of intercultural assistants' work (including financing) rests with local governments. In the large city, the city council has developed a scheme for employing cultural assistants in the frame of the city council's program. In this scheme, cultural assistants can be hired full time or part time on administrative position. School principals can apply to the city council to finance such a position if they recognize such a need in their school. Many school principals, however, are unaware of the possibility to hire a cultural assistant or are unwilling to do so. Being hired as administrative staff is less favourable as working as a teacher who have fewer working hours (18 a week compared to 40 by non-teachers), longer holidays, higher salary and better working conditions. Intercultural assistants are frequently hired part-time and only employed for the duration of the school year, which makes their employment very precarious.

Intercultural assistants are hired by schools in administrative positions although they perform pedagogical work. They are engaged in a whole array of tasks which not only encompasses contact with the child but also the school system, its organization, family system, support policies provided by specialists –the school principal, educators, psychologists, and other teachers.

Their activities include:

- assistance in mastering the Polish language, helping children becoming independent in school,
- help in understanding the differences between the educational system in Poland and the country of origin,
- organizing children's education at school,
- accompanying pupils during classes (if children do not speak Polish), recognition of education needs of the child,
- assistance with homework, assistance in communication with teachers and between teachers and parents,
- contact with specialists at school - pedagogue, psychologist, head of class,
- psychological support for children,
- explaining the specificity of the behaviour of migrant children to Polish teachers,
- solving conflicts and interventions in case of discrimination at school,
- bringing other cultures closer.

The intercultural assistants play crucial role in the education and adaptation of migrant children at school. They have a dual role as an insider (being a migrant, speaking the mother tongue, for example Russian) and also a professional working at school and speaking Polish which allows them to be successful mediators between pupils, parents and the school and better understand the perspectives of all parties involved.

*TABLE 3 EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF INTERCULTURAL ASSISTANTS*

|   | Education                                                                                           | Professional experience                                                | Nationality           | ISCED                                  |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1 | MA in agriculture (Ukraine); postgraduate studies in teaching Polish as a foreign language (Poland) | 30 years; 8 years of voluntary work as a cultural assistant, librarian | Polish                | ISCED 1-2                              |
| 2 | BA in research information (Poland)                                                                 | 3 years                                                                | Polish                | ISCED 1-2 with integration departments |
| 3 | MA in linguistics and pedagogy (Ukraine)                                                            | 2 years                                                                | Ukrainian             | ISCED 1-2                              |
| 4 | MA in history (Ukraine) in Ukraine; teaching Polish as a foreign language (in progress), (Poland);  | 3 months-remote teaching in Covid-19                                   | Ukrainian             | ISCED 3                                |
| 5 | MA in Polish philology with history (Poland)                                                        | 4 months, remote teaching                                              | Ukrainian             | ISCED 1-2<br>ISCED 3                   |
| 6 | mechanical engineering (Ukraine)                                                                    | 1 year                                                                 | Ukrainian             | ISCED 1-2                              |
| 7 | Higher technical education (Poland)                                                                 | Not specified, many years                                              | Vietnamese and Polish | Vietnamese Association in Krakow       |

#### 4. The experience of migrant children from the perspective of professionals

##### Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff

Teachers recognized several challenges in working with refugee children (who attend schools near centres for foreigners, most of whom come from Chechnya) and migrant children who attend schools in large cities, most of whom are economic migrants (in our group there were teachers working especially with children coming from Ukraine, Belarus, and to a lesser extent Turkey, Nigeria). Their experiences vary depending on their professional competences, time working with migrant and refugee children, and whether they work in a school located in a large city or small town. We divided the challenges which migrant children face into two types. The first concerns education and includes children's achievements, aspirations, and agency, and factors that are related to these aspects such as language, cultural differences, and their family situation. The second is related to the social and emotional functioning of these children, where peer relationships, discrimination and sense of belonging are important.



## Educational functioning: achievement, aspirations, and agency

There are many circumstances that challenge the fulfilment of the aspirations and attainment of the educational goals of children with migration experience. The most important of these are related to language barriers, family situation, and cultural differences.

### Educational and linguistic functioning

Teachers shared many observations regarding children's language skills with us. The language barrier is not only due to a lack of skills in spoken and written language, but also to specialized vocabulary related to education. Their opinion was further confirmed by the professionals working in the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre who noted that even for children staying in Poland for a long time, the use of Polish as the language of instruction is a barrier.

Even though they've often been here for a longer period of time, for example for a year, it isn't only those children who have just arrived, but they've been here for a longer period of time, there's very little amount of hours of Polish as a foreign language and apart from the fact that they don't have the basic communicative skills, there are also problems in the educational sphere, because in Polish they don't understand many subjects, like for example the analysis of a poem or a metaphor, they also have problems in biology and history. Because in those universal subjects, like mathematics, it's the least of their problems, because they can understand them without the knowledge of the language, in the case of the other subjects, well, it's troublesome for them. (PL\_F1\_T\_1\_F)

The language barrier is a challenge for all migrant children; however, teachers recognize important differences in overcoming this barrier. According to them, children who speak languages from the Slavic language family (Russian, Ukrainian) learn Polish faster than students who speak English, for example.

As for the boys and girls from Ukraine and the east of us, it's actually easy because these children learn Polish very quickly. (PL\_T7\_F)

However, I happened to have a pupil, also a Chechen, who wanted to learn, was ambitious, making progress. It is generally observed that it is easier for Ukrainian children, because the language is similar. (PL\_T12\_F)

This is a risky statement as not all children have an aptitude for language, and some may need more time to acquire it. Children may give the impression that they understand, e.g. by nodding that they understand everything because of the power distance which is large in Polish culture but might be even larger in the cultures from which children come from (Hofstede, Hofstede, 2007), but in fact they may not understand the instructions and they do not want to undermine the authority of the teachers. This may be particularly true during the adaptation phase, when children are experiencing stress. The same happens with children from returning families who, although they often speak Polish as an everyday language, they do not know the language of education and have difficulty understanding instructions in various subjects e.g. mathematics. Learning Polish is also hindered if migrant or refugee children live in a homogenous ethnic and national environment, rarely having contact with Polish peers. As was noted by teachers, having a high number of Polish children in the classroom, where peer relations are more differentiated, facilitates the acquisition of a good command of Polish, in both reading and writing. On the other hand, there are also many statements indicating that children who also speak other languages, such as Turkish, are able with proper support and motivation to acquire Polish to such an extent that they realize their educational aspirations. Similar opinions were expressed by teachers from large urban schools and those close to centres for foreigners:



## Child-Up

The sister of the girl from Turkey has already left school, she went to high school. She learned Polish very quickly. The brother overcame barriers very quickly, they participated in math, English competitions. (PL\_T3\_F)

We often have to deal with a situation [that the child doesn't speak Polish or Russian]. For example, we had a girl in the 3rd grade, from Mongolia. She grew up to be a wonderful girl, but she could not speak Polish [or Russian]. The teachers who taught her used to run to me or to the English teacher [for help]. Now she speaks excellent Polish, writes excellent Polish, passed the exam very well, so it's possible. (PL\_T5\_M)

In large urban schools, teachers emphasize that many parents from Ukraine or Belarus come to Poland for a "better" life and these families mostly belong to the group of economic migrants. However, the reason for their arrival is not known in every case, as some parents, although they do not seek refugee status, also come to Poland out of fear of war (e.g. from the Crimea region and recently also from Belarus). In many cases, children are motivated to learn by parents and therefore they try to overcome the difficulties they encounter on their own. This is what a teacher from a school in the large city says:

We have foreign children at school, they are ambitious children, and I have noticed that they are able to achieve some success, and we don't have big problems with these children at school, this boy is an exception. These children are always looked after, they have their homework done. (...) He also had emotional problems, he wanted to succeed and get good grades, I suppose it was like that in Ukraine, he felt demotivated, got angry, reacted impulsively when he got worse grades. He has better academic results but not in all subjects, some concepts are too difficult for him, he does not react as impulsively as before. (PL\_T8\_F)

This statement indicates that the language barrier and acculturation stress can make it difficult for children to achieve goals that are consistent with their aspirations. Children's reactions during lessons may be misunderstood. They may stem from a sense of powerlessness and an inability to overcome barriers without adequate support. On the other hand, it is also challenging for the teacher to work with a child who has difficulties with comprehension and language acquisition because teachers lack child-specific work tools (see section "Working with children and their families").

Teachers working in schools close to the centres for foreigners sometimes find it difficult to estimate children's aspirations, because children attend particular school for a very short period as the family treats Poland as a transitory country. Such situations negatively influence a children's motivation to learn.

The unfortunate thing is that as teachers, we have no way to verify children's aspirations because these kids are quickly gone. We rarely have the opportunity to see what has happened to these kids. (...) These kids are vanishing, it's impossible to verify. (PL\_T5\_M)

Teachers are aware that there are other health circumstances and individual differences in addition to migration that also affect the children's performance at school. They try to recognize the children's strengths, the child's efforts despite the lack of adequate results. The psychological and pedagogical counselling centre's staff, just as the teachers pointed out, admitted that children who migrate, apart from the experience of migration, also experience developmental difficulties, such as developmental language disorders or dyslexia. It often turns out that a diagnosis made at an earlier stage in the country of origin is incorrect and needs to be verified.

The diagnosis of learning difficulties is made even more difficult due to the language barrier. The counsellors admitted that they do not have access to translators, psychological and pedagogical tools in different languages. They use their own language resources, such as English and Spanish, but there are few



people who speak Ukrainian or Russian. This creates a feeling of helplessness when children and parents who do not speak Polish come to the counselling centre and seek help.

There is often a need to support parents in their upbringing, it would also be a great support for the child, to talk a bit about how to react, these are often parents who are under stress, in crisis, in the process of adaptation, so they themselves need to sort out certain things. And this would often have a very positive effect on the functioning of the child. And how it works in practice depends on the language level, how well the parent operates in Polish, because if it's basic, we can talk about some things, really exchange some information, give some hints. But if the level is low, then I often face a great helplessness, because there is a problem with access to translators, we don't have them, and sometimes we don't have the possibility to support these parents, either educationally or psychologically, even temporarily, until they find some other support. (PL\_F1\_T\_4\_F)

It is difficult to verify or make an adequate diagnosis. The diagnosis of these children, as opposed to children of Polish descent, differs in duration and sometimes there are many meetings with schools and parents to determine the optimum forms of support for the child. Not all schools employ a cultural assistant and therefore such a person cannot always support the child at a meeting with a psychologist.

### Cultural differences in educational contexts

Cultural differences area challenge that also need to be overcome so that children can achieve their own educational and social aspirations. Understanding cultural texts like fairy tales allows them to find common ground with their peers. Teachers emphasize that children with appropriate intellectual potential are able to cope with cultural differences in terms of educational context or curriculum differences. A teacher from a school in the large city commented on this in the following manner:

The teaching of history and Polish language is complicated. There is such a thing as cultural context. These children came to us with a different cultural context, no one read "Locomotive" or watched Reksio or Bolek and Lolek<sup>2</sup> in their childhood. This is a colossal difference. But those children who want to and have the intellectual potential [can achieve well]. (PL\_T5\_M)

Some classes – such as the "Upbringing to a family life" subject– are also difficult to accept for the parents of Muslim children, who question the need for such knowledge. In the case of any conflict between the curriculum content and the precepts of Islam, those children would simply not attend the lesson.

They are only children. You have to teach at school, but you have to look at their situation differently. They asked me: Upbringing to a family life. What is this subject about? I explained to them: It is a subject about family, similar to biology. They participated in a few classes. Probably told their parents at home what topics were discussed during the lesson. Their parents did not let them go again. At that time, they had biology about a woman's body (...). A naked woman!? They closed the books in anger. The teacher said: This is a woman's body. That's what you look like. But you're not ashamed that you show us such things, that you watch such things? - they asked. She said that: It's a shame if you don't have knowledge. If you do not study and learn. The parents were outraged. They did not want their children to participate in biology classes. We explained to them that those topics are obligatory in the curriculum. (PL\_T13\_F)

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<sup>2</sup> "Locomotive" - a well known children's poem by Julian Tuwim, Reksio, BolekiLolek – Polish animated series for children.

## Cultural differences between the culture of the parents and the country of immigration

Parental attitude to education is another factor influencing the situation of migrant children at school. It is particularly visible in the statements of teachers working at schools near the centres for foreigners, where refugee families who are from very different life situations and are often after traumatic experiences, are staying. In the case of Muslim families (to which most Chechens belong) the division of social roles according to gender is different. According to the teachers, in many of them, though not all, the dominant cultural pattern is that girls finish their education quite early in order to get married.

One girl said that she was going to get married. And I replied: What do you mean? She was in the first year of secondary school, at the hairdressing school. She said she would still like to study, but she was already engaged. She already has a boyfriend, a family. (...) Her older sister was also forced to marry. They were together for 3 months and she ran away from that boy because he beat her. (PL\_T13\_F)

In the case of the Chechen families, cultural differences in the understanding of social roles and the role of education in the family play a crucial role in the functioning of the child. If the value to the family is the marriage of the daughter, then the parents will not encourage the child to spend time studying. The poorer grades of girls could be the result of the lack of time for learning, since girls must help their mothers in bringing up their younger siblings, and also serve their brothers.

Girls, especially those who are in the primary school, would help their mothers a lot in bringing up their younger siblings, and girls seem to be more resourceful, more caring, what I noticed earlier in my work. Boys again are more attached to their fathers and need such support, and they need to provide such support to their sisters, because they are brought up to do so, for being prowess, for self-protection. Often (girls) are seen by teachers as persons, who don't want to learn, but seek to get married. Because someone who knows that culture is aware that girls get married earlier. A problem can appear at this point with mutual communication. If you don't want to learn, there is no place for you here. (PL\_T1\_F)

High personal academic expectations and the persistence of parents show that migrant girls also want to educate themselves.

Girls want to continue their education, they want to stay in Poland, continue studying, and educate themselves. They link their plans to it. They are not girls looking for husbands anymore. No, these girls think differently. Probably girls are more ambitious, more hardworking, girls have a more ambitious attitude than boys. (PL\_T4\_F)

Therefore, the teachers observe that there are different patterns of behaviour among Muslim girls. While some girls fulfil traditional roles, others try to negotiate their available opportunities and follow more emancipated paths.

Girls are very modest, although there is no single pattern. There are girls who scrupulously observe the rules of Islam, we have pupils who walk in long dresses with their hair covered. We have girls who feel comfortable in this European cultural pattern, or they dress in a European way. Sometimes they are reluctant to participate in sports lessons, because it is necessary to change into sportswear. (PL\_T13\_F)

Some families know that education is important, children have better results when parents motivate them, when they treat education as a value and opportunity for child. This is particularly important for the children in our study, since those between 7(1st ISCED 1) and 15 (8th ISCED 2) are still very dependent on their parents. Parents play a key role in the development of educational aspirations, regardless of the type



of migration or country of origin. Teachers from schools close to the centres for foreigners commented on this in the following manner:

If a man grew up under the care of a father who worked occasional jobs all his life and they lived very well, they would have survived somehow if it hadn't been for the war, it is difficult to develop in such a parent the conviction that it is necessary to study in order to have a profession. Often students answer the question of what do you want to become or what will you work as with a shrug of the shoulders (PL\_T5\_M)

There is small number of families in the centres for foreigners that attach importance to education of their children, especially girls (...) so maybe in their world the girl shouldn't be educated, maybe her role in life is different, maybe, I don't know. (PL\_T14\_F)

On the other hand, this understanding of cultural differences as barriers to school achievement may be unfair since, when viewed from the perspective of the family's culture of origin, perhaps fulfilling the roles assigned at home can be a choice and an expression of children's agency. Children living in Poland begin to perceive differences between cultural patterns in their family of origin and outside it. However, this kind of empowerment could be discussed if the child consciously made decisions about his/her future by considering different solutions rather than following imposed roles. This can lead to a conflict of values in the child, as well as an increase in generational conflict between children and their parents. In the following statement we can see that the orientation to collective values related to the care of the family can be a manifestation of the child's important role in the family.

The boy says he didn't do the task because he made breakfast for everyone in the morning. Mom goes to work, so he takes care for the rest of the family. They have their father in prison. He is mentally ill because of what happened in Chechnya. They live only with Mom. (PL\_T13\_F)

In this case, the boy assumed the role of the father. By pursuing collective values (caring for the family) rather than individualistic ones (acquiring education), his role in a family is likely to increase. Children who still have difficulty speaking Polish and integrating into a peer group may rely on the values and behaviour patterns that are promoted at home. Additionally, random life circumstances (the lack of a father figure) cause the delegation of the role of caregiver to the son.

Cultural differences, but also the experience of acculturation stress, can manifest themselves in children in the form of different, not always compliant behaviours. Rude behaviour may be misinterpreted by teachers and even be a sign of depression or post-traumatic disorders. Teachers from schools close to the centres also notice differences in the behaviour of girls and boys. In the case of refugee Chechen families, there is also the problem of cultural differences in the way female teachers are treated by boys. When the teacher is a woman, boys sometimes do not follow rules, do not follow instructions, which can be difficult for female teachers, but can also be a barrier to the children's acquisition of new content: "Sometimes they are rebellious. Especially boys when they are rebuked by female teacher. In their culture, women are seen differently so they don't like being rebuked by woman, they are reluctant to obey orders" (PL\_T14\_F).

Moreover, religion shapes the everyday life of migrant pupils and their families. It used to be a major challenge for children and their parents to be in a space where Catholicism is present in such an evident way (crosses in classes, celebration of religious holidays).

No, in our school there are not [special religion lessons for refugee children]. Refugee children don't attend religion classes. Religion is often first or last in the plan. If it is in the middle of classes children can go to common room. (PL\_T4\_F)



Even though children do not have to participate in religion class, they participate in religious celebrations. However according to the interlocutor migrant children and their parents got used to the domination of Catholicism over time. Teachers who work in schools near the centres talk about this:

We have never pressed anything on foreign students, but we have beautiful experiences. For example, two years ago and last year Muslim children performed at a nativity play. The priest speaks to our children, the gospel is read. And migrant children like Christmas carols, my student plays "Bóg się rodzi" on a dulcimer. (...) We don't push anyone to do something. We are a Catholic school, although it is not written in the name, but we are a village school, by force of tradition, parents' demands, parents' expectations, teachers' expectations. We simply celebrate holiday. (PL\_T5\_M)

Our Chechen children performed in the Christmas speech. Our priest says that they will become Christians soon (...). (PL\_T13\_F)

The above statements indicate expectations of adaptation, adoption of assimilation strategies in the context of religion. In the statements of some teachers, it is possible to see a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences and the adoption of an ethnocentric attitude. On the one hand, according to them, participation in religious events can be a form of integration, on the other hand, although teachers do not pressure students in the context of participation in these events, these students may feel obliged towards teachers who have more power. The following statement by a female teacher shows such a situation:

We had preparation for the teacher's day and we performed a Belgian dance. One girl refused to shake the boy's hand. I started talking to her, I showed her videos that in other dances you can touch, and nobody gets hurt. I showed her some of these dances. I told her: "Here, the boys won't hurt either. Just put your hand closer to his hand." And she tried. The dance turned out very well. (PL\_T9\_F)

Sometimes teachers do not know how to behave when they observe cultural differences. There are some situations at school where teachers convince children to break some of cultural rules which feature in conservative Islam, like boys touching girls. Teachers may have good intentions but in such power relations children often cannot refuse to follow the teachers' recommendations and they (or their parents) might feel bad about the results of those actions. Thus, it is likely that beyond cultural differences, family circumstances, or language barriers, the cultural sensitivity of teachers is also a factor related to the functioning of children with migration experiences in the school environment.

Social-emotional functioning: peer relationships, discrimination, and sense of belonging

#### *Socio-emotional functioning*

An important area perceived by those working in the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre is the lack of adequate psychological support at school. This was mentioned earlier by teachers, especially those working in schools near centres for foreigners.

And the counselling centre, and we are counselling centre workers, well it deals with a certain extreme, it may not be nice to be there, but our activities are directed to the margin of these children, not to all children, and all children need care. I am sure that many children do not go to counselling centres because they do not necessarily know about their existence, these counselling centres, or for various other reasons parents do not decide to get such help, because they did not get the hint at school. Well, I would like to believe that they don't end up there because they have that care at school, but that's not the case. (PL\_F1\_T\_5\_F)



Children with migration experience often face adaptation stress, which can significantly affect their educational and social functioning. The language barrier can result in an inability to reach one's potential and exacerbate emotional difficulties, sometimes resulting in withdrawal from the peer group. Language barriers, educational difficulties and emotional difficulties related to the change of residence limit the child's ability to function if they do not receive appropriate support. These may be extreme cases, but such children are first placed in Polish schools and then in the care of counselling centres. Such children require special care and the implementation of certain measures in schools in order to build a sense of security, to enable their further development in accordance with psychophysical possibilities.

### *Peer relationships*

Teachers perceive differences between the relationships of children in ISCED 1 and ISCED 2. According to their observations, children in the younger grades are integrated into the classroom more quickly, largely because learning in Grades 1-3 is largely conducted through play: "With 1st graders, they spend a lot of time in the common room, they integrate then, they play together" (PL\_T7\_F). In addition, children in 1st grade are just beginning to learn to read and write and therefore children complete some tasks together.

The problem arises in higher classes, when the language gap is bigger due to specialized vocabulary connected with education and youth slang. Teachers try to choose the composition of the group in such a way that children have the emotional support of other foreign children. However, they recognize that this can have a negative impact on language learning.

On the one hand we give them to one class so that they have some support in each other, but on the other hand the problem arises in higher classes, when the language gap is bigger due to specialized vocabulary connected with education and youth slang. Teachers try to choose the composition of the group in such a way that children have the emotional support of other foreign children. However, they recognize that this can have a negative impact on language learning.

On the one hand we give them to one class so that they have some support in each other, but on the other hand I don't know if it's good, because then these children inevitably have to integrate with Polish children, and then they have to struggle, they're not together. (PL\_T7\_F)

Initially, however, being in an environment where children speak a similar language can support children's psychological adjustment, build a sense of security, and can positively influence cognitive opportunities for learning. Teachers recognize the importance of supporting children and their social-emotional functioning. In the case of a Nigerian student, the teacher's intervention and support was crucial because the student, due to language difficulties and her different skin colour, felt different and her anxiety levels were elevated, making it difficult for her to relate to her peers.

I wanted her to start communicating socially. It was the basic thing, that she was not ashamed of her language. Because at the very beginning when she went down the street she was hiding her head in her arms and she was afraid to walk down the street. (PL\_T6\_F)

The beginning was very euphoric, everyone wanted to size her up. I let them use the communicators to talk to her. Then it cooled down, the kids were just tired, so much so that the English teacher assigned her guardians, and there were two girls who stayed with her for a very long time. (PL\_T7\_F)

Children's sense of belonging and security is related to feeling accepted by other peers. As seen in the example above, it also involves making an effort on the part of the rest of the students who also try to communicate in foreign language (e.g. to use a translator) to make new student feel comfortable.

Building peer relations is also illustrated by the example of a boy's experiences which, although difficult, allowed him to find his place in the group and to present his knowledge.



There were no problems [with integration]. I have a boy in the fifth grade, and I will tell you that I forget about him, sometimes when I prepare various summaries. I forget that he is in the class, he integrated with the children so well. He immediately won the sympathy of the boys, because he talked a lot about war. Everything was shooting, all the drawings were about war, because it was the time of aggression in the Crimea. He also has such tendencies, and this influenced the sympathy of the boys, who accepted him with all his military ideas. (PL\_T7\_F)

Additionally, perhaps speaking openly about the situation in the country of origin can have a therapeutic effect for some children. In this case, working through difficult experiences in the form of drawing or play and having these behaviours accepted by peers may help the child cope with traumatic experiences. What also supports a sense of belonging is the opportunity to present the child's language and traditions related to the celebration of holidays.

When I was a teacher, we spent a lot of time discussing this. At that time there was a lot of talk about Ukraine, the pupil was talking about the war, what was happening. We even learned the Cyrillic alphabet, how they celebrate holidays, birthdays. (PL\_T7\_F)

Despite the language barrier, teachers manage to awaken in children a sense of responsibility for others and introduce a support system for the child with migration experience. Below is a description of the situation of a boy who came from Ukraine to one of the schools in the large city.

Ivan is accepted in the class, but it was not like that from the very beginning. Because of the language barrier, it backfired in social interactions. The boy was isolated, on the sidelines. Then he got in touch with 2-3 people, and now he talks to half of the class, which is a big success. Nobody teases him in the class. (...) The kids in the class don't visit [Ivan], but they help at school, send homework to each other, information about the topic of the homework, a note from the lesson. (PL\_T8\_F)

The child has received adequate support from peers at school; however, teachers observe that what happens at school does not correspond with free time after school. Children do not meet with each other in parks or visit each other's places of living. This is observed by teachers from schools in the urban area as well as from the schools close to the centres for foreigners: "Most children accept her at school but outside they do not want to keep in touch with her" (PL\_T6\_F). Refugee children sometimes have fewer resources to be able to establish and maintain social relationships due to their traumatic experiences and the emotional consequences.

I think that they move here [from their countries] with many difficult experiences, that is why I think that here it was hard for them to accept our reality. There were fights, conflicts. They weren't necessarily into social relations in general. (PL\_T13\_F)

These children in particular need adequate support from professionals in building relationships as well as acceptance by the host community in order to feel safe in their new school.

### Sense of belonging

There was little information in the teachers' statements about their interpretation of migrant children's sense of belonging. Nevertheless, some teachers perceive that the children do not feel a sense of belonging to Poland, which may be related to the formation of a hybrid or global identity, but mainly also lack of attachment to one place: "She does not link her plans with Poland, she would like to live maybe in England, maybe Berlin, she talks about Europe but not Poland"(PL\_T6\_F). Teachers, on the one hand, accept those broader plans of children, but on the other hand, they have expectations of the assimilation and adoption of Polish traditions by children.



As a teacher I do not have to assume any goal, because those kids have Ukraine in them and we will not get rid of it and nobody even wants to do that. Because it is their country where they grew up until they were 5-6 years old. But I do not have much to do here as far as integration is concerned because these kids will feel Polish in a while. If they stay here, Poland will be their country, more important than Ukraine. They will attend high school here, they will find a job here. Ukraine will be living inside their parents, but not so much inside those children. (...) even Celina, who did not give a sound at the beginning, she starts already to argue in Polish. (PL\_T6\_F)

The changes concerning the sense of belonging to a place, observed by teachers, concern various spheres of children's lives. The more public ones, such as school and work in the future, require the children to adapt to Polish conditions to a larger extent. Nevertheless, the family is still a sphere where the culture of the parents may be dominant. Teachers see language as a marker of acculturation or a sense of belonging, but it is not the only factor. It may be more dominant in the case of some children, but for others it may be equally important to maintain traditions, values prevailing in the culture of origin and nobody actually asks them if they feel Polish or Ukrainian, what kind of traditions they perceive at home.

Our goal as far as integration is concerned is to show her that she is fully accepted (...) and at the same time show her what is nice, what she might like. But we cannot impose anything on her, because she will not accept that, only as a gift (...) But she will not be fascinated by our culture, (...) because she is Nigerian, and she has that in her soul and in her body. She came here as an 11-year old girl and she has many friends there. I came to her with my heart in my hands, for me there is no problem that she came from such a distant place. (PL\_T6\_F)

Selective cultural adaptation and thus the process of identity formation in adolescents is associated with ambivalence, a lack of a sense of belonging, especially during adolescence. Children at home are "foreign", while at school they should be Polish. Teachers are often somewhat lost in this respect, even though most do not raise this issue, which may indicate a lack of awareness of the conflict of values that many children from migrant family's face.

Teachers note that children's identities are in the process of being constructed, and as far as refugee children are concerned, this process is strongly influenced by the culture of the country of origin, and one may speak of a one-way identity or ambivalence due to the limited livelihood strategies of their parents. The children of economic migrants quickly take root in Poland, they speak Polish quite well and negotiate their identity, and this change is thanks to their sense of agency. Identity negotiations between Poland and the country of origin may create hybrid identities, which allows them to emphasize cultural manifestations appropriate to life and school situations.

### Discrimination

The results of the analysis indicate the presence of discrimination in schools on several levels. The first is discrimination resulting from functioning stereotypes about the behaviour and temperament of Chechens, which is particularly experienced by Chechen refugees according to teachers working in schools close to the centres for foreigners.

Some older children went to high school. We helped them, because they did not want to accept them because they come from Chechnya, because there will be fights. (...) The Chechen family wanted to stay here. They got a work permit, a temporary stay and had to move out of the reception centre. They had a problem because whoever heard that they were from Chechnya didn't want to rent them an apartment. (Pl\_T13\_F)



The second one is the isolation of migrant children and behavioural acts of discrimination. Teachers from schools close to the centres for foreigners admit that in the past there were many behavioural problems with refugee children, which resulted in their isolation. Aggressive behaviours can have other causes as well, such as those related to the importance of honour in the family. For example, Chechen boys feel responsibility to protect the girls from their community and defend them from other boys: "We had a situation when a girl was teased by other children. Then a brother or a cousin would bring justice to the Polish boys" (PL\_T5\_M). Nevertheless, over time the amount of difficult behaviours decreased, and the children began to mix with each other and enter into intergroup relations: "Sometimes there are fights, which can be very aggressive. However, we have not had any cases for years". (PL\_T5\_M)

Teachers in schools close to the centres for foreigners sometimes have different opinions about discrimination. Perhaps this is due to their different lengths of service in the schools. A man who worked in a school when refugees first arrived claims that the attitude of the host community was hostile, whereas a teacher who joined the teaching staff later claims that it was the refugee children who behaved aggressively towards Polish children and thus conflicts arose. This may indicate a significant change in intergroup relations over time. Teachers emphasized that there were fewer and fewer Polish children in schools over time due to conflicts:

Our children [Polish] always treated them with respect. It never happened that a Polish child beat up a Chechen child. Once a Chechen boy hid his shoes from a Polish boy. (PI\_T13\_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 unfavourable, not to say hostile. (PL\_T5\_M)

The changes may have been due to the integration activities undertaken by the teachers. These changes can also be explained by the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). There are a large number of migrants in the schools at the centres, so contact is intense and due to the integration activities undertaken by the teachers there may have been a reduction in prejudice and acts of discrimination.

At the beginning the girl from Turkey reacted in different ways, she showed some people something, and others she pushed away, kicked them. So there was this aggression. Now it is definitely better. Although she is such a girl quite difficult to raise. That was the problem, that she didn't want to, even with this assistant, say anything. She never wanted to talk, even when she did something wrong. Her mom had a hard time with her at home. We couldn't get to the bottom of things. (PL\_T3\_F)

The last example involves a student from a school in a large city. As it can be seen, she developed similar aggressive behaviours that may be a response to the adaptive stress that children may experience during relocation. Additionally, children may have developmental difficulties or have previously experienced emotional difficulties that are exacerbated by the stress of relocation and should be provided with psychological support.

Teachers mostly agree that Ukrainian children do not experience discrimination because of their origin. Teachers at schools in the large city speak of nicknames used towards migrant children using the name of the country from which they come, but they play down the significance of this form of discrimination. This may not indicate that the children do not experience this form of discrimination so much, but that the teachers do not treat slurs and nicknames as a form of discrimination.

It is at an age that 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 we this situation is reported to me and we talk. But such teasing is also among children from Poland. (PL\_T7\_F)

No, I think that kids welcomed them very well, right away, I would say, they integrated with the whole group. There is no division into those from Ukraine. They are treated equally just like other children. (PL\_T2\_F)

Nonetheless, a few teachers in the large city did make statements about discrimination and how to deal with it.

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 Nigeria came and she also caused a shock because she is in a different colour. Racist behaviour 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 different problem. She doesn't speak Polish. 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 the 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 what child can be a racist in the fourth grade? (PL\_T15\_F)

Teachers emphasized the role of parents in the formation of prejudice in children. According to the teacher, reacting and rewarding the person who helped the discriminated girl made the level of discrimination decrease in the school. Thus, it is also possible to observe the teacher's agency in this area and the real changes that occur when teachers react to discrimination.

### Social workers

Social workers also recognize the difficulties of migrant children which, as in the previous subsections, are divided into adaptation problems and their consequences and social-emotional functioning. However, they focus on the perspective of the whole families rather than the children themselves. Therefore, the child's needs and any educational issues are placed in the context of the specific problems of a family.

### Adaptation problems and their consequences

According to social workers, children's educational functioning is greatly affected by adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences. Additionally, these children do not feel safe as they see the helplessness of their parents who do not speak Polish and experience their own adaptation problems.

As far as this first family is concerned, there were certainly such adaptation problems. Maybe it was also a matter of culture. They were very alienated children. Apart from the fact that they didn't speak the language, in that case, their mum didn't speak the language either, and it was such a barrier that we were very distrustful, as you explained. The children were generally so withdrawn. I don't know how much at school, but how I came into contact with them. In the case of the other family, well, I wasn't supposed to be in the environment, but I saw the children, because they were with me in the centre, well, in one case it was a small sick child, and in the other case it's hard for me to say, but it was problems of adaptation and contact. (PL\_SW1\_M)



Parents are not only confused about school rules or administrative procedures, but also about typical situations such as going to the doctor. The parent's behaviour may be interpreted as a lack of interest in the child or neglect. According to the pattern present in the culture of origin, the parent may treat the doctor as an authority and only listen to what the doctor has to say, without any comments or questions. In situations of cultural differences in the rules regulating social relations, many misunderstandings may occur such as those described below.

The boy was in [the name of an association whose activities concern running day-care centre for children and youth], in the association, and he reacted aggressively towards his friend. He was throwing scissors, and they intervened and called the ambulance because they were afraid that something might happen, and they called the police, too, I think. The ambulance took the child to [name of a street] to the psychiatric ward. And then this lady, the mother, came there. And the important thing was that they [doctors - DB] were open to talking. When she came to see her son, she didn't ask the doctors "what happened", she listened to what they were saying to her. She wasn't asking about the situation, she was just waiting to hear what they were going to tell her. And they perceived it as, I suspect, as little interest in such reprehensible behaviour by her son. The hospital sent a letter to the court to have the court review the case. And the court decided, according to its competence, what they thought was wrong with the family. And it could also be a matter of culture. In Poland, everyone is taught that when you go to the doctor, you have to ask. I was not there at the hospital. (PL\_SW3\_F)

Social workers emphasize that associations that organize activities for children play a helpful role in the adaptation and educational problems of children. The role of these institutions is described in the section dedicated to the topic of integration.

### Socio-emotional functioning of migrant children

#### *Cultural differences and sense of belonging*

Just like teachers, social workers observe the challenges children face during the period of their adolescence. These children function somewhere between the values and cultural patterns of their country of living as well as the culture of origin of their parents. The greater the cultural differences (e.g. in the case of children from conservative Muslim families) the greater the conflict of values children may experience while they fulfil developmental tasks such as exploring their own gender identity.

Anyway, there was a problem of cultural conflict there too. They were Muslims, and the girls at school, well, it was a different culture, different freedom. There was no talk at all about any kind of sexual contact, and here peers in Poland were much freer, more liberated on this subject. The difference was comparable to the times when we had socialism and someone from behind the Iron Curtain came to visit. So this girl had such two faces, at home she was calm adapted to what the family, what the sisters wanted. They talked about boys, but there were no sexual themes. No kissing, etc. Outside the home, at school, she began to have these even lesbian-tinged friendships, I don't know if that sounds right, and that didn't sit well with her mother. They didn't talk about it at their place, and she had brought up 8 or even more girls, because one stayed in Russia, 3 were grown up. (PL\_SW5\_F)

#### *Cultural differences and domestic violence*

A major challenge and factor shaping the situation of migrant children is domestic violence. In many countries domestic violence is understood differently than it is in Poland. Assistants make parents aware of the consequences of domestic violence, but they also stress that working with the issue of violence in



migrant families is very complex also because of the language barrier, but also because of the cultural differences between legal regulations.

The issue of violence is also a difficult one. Because, for example, what is not violence in Marrakech is a whole catalogue in the blue card procedure in our country. (PL\_SW6\_F)

There was violence, but this violence was also because cultural norms are different. What is violence in our country is not violence there. Holding a child, hitting her. She held her by the neck, she even had a mark there. In turn, the girl scratched her mother. What is violence in our country is not violence in Ukraine. She was not aware of it either. As a result of the blue card the situation improved, in the meantime the girl turned 18. (PL\_SW5\_F)

Some parents are unaware of these differences and use violence as a parenting method. Therefore, it is not only the task of social workers to provide psychoeducation in this field, but also to monitor the changes made in the parenting systems by parents of children from migrant families. Problems of violence also arise in mixed marriages.

### *Cultural differences and discrimination*

Social workers do not perceive discrimination towards migrant families. Perhaps the observations of the workers are not fully reliable, because they do not stay with the children in the institutions such as schools and rely on their parent's declarations. They also do not perceive differences between boys and girls when it comes to their school achievements as they can both cope well at school.

I have not encountered such problems. Rather, these children are functioning normally, entering into these peer relationships. (PL\_SW6\_F)

There was no such attitude that something can be a psychological predisposition, only that they are from Ukraine. (PL\_SW3\_F)

I had only girls, I didn't meet, nor did I hear from my friends about differences in the needs of girls and boys. I didn't encounter such situations, maybe because they were rather smaller children. But these children were rather treated like Polish ones. (PL\_SW5\_F)

The above statement can be interpreted as discrimination or ascribing stereotypical characteristics to a culture, which are probably due to other factors such as psychological conditions or individual differences.

### *Intercultural assistants*

Intercultural assistants, like the previously described groups, recognise the range of needs of children with migration experience. Due to the nature of their work, in which they accompany children in lessons or have one-to-one sessions with children, they can establish a close relationship with them and their families. Their observations deepen the teachers' perspective. The aim of the assistant's work is to support the child and family enough to enable the child to function in school and achieve his or her full potential without the assistant's support. They usually support several children at the same time, but this number varies and depends on the overall number of migrant pupils at school:

My name is X, I work as an intercultural assistant in a primary school with integration classes. As of February 2019 and when I came, there were about forty-five foreign students at school, four of them from families returning to Poland. They were mainly from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Georgia, and there were two students from Chechnya. At this point, right now, we've got thirty-nine, and I'm mostly working with eight. These are actually children who arrived two weeks before the pandemic or something like that for a year or two, and have a hard time adapting, due to their difficulties a bit. I do all the work that an



intercultural assistant does. Today, during the pandemic, we do all of this, perhaps a little more. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

### Educational challenges: Language barrier, exams

Intercultural assistants observe the difficulties that the language barrier presents not only in communication, but also in situations of understanding cultural texts or knowing specific vocabulary.

Helping children in learning, what I've mentioned, so that teachers were able to adjust requirements, texts, while teaching children and that a kid should not have to write tests, I saw it with my own eyes, a Polish language test, an almost empty sheet was handed in by a girl and the test was taken by a girl from Ukraine, she was a seventh grader at that time: Madam, I really don't understand it. And your heart simply breaks. How could such a kid write things about *Balladyna* [a Polish drama written by Juliusz Słowacki]. So I would, I would do that. (PL\_F1\_M1\_F)

Intercultural assistants, because of their own experience of migration, are more sensitive to the difficulties of children than teachers who may not have experienced such a change themselves and are not well prepared to work with such children. The above quote not only indicates the fact that the test had not been adapted to the child's linguistic abilities, but also a lack of understanding of the child's situation, a lack of sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences. Such behaviour on the part of the teacher may be treated as a sign of discrimination. Intercultural assistants also emphasize the importance of the language barrier as a factor that may prevent an adequate diagnosis of the causes of children's school difficulties. The impossibility of diagnosing developmental difficulties with a language barrier can exacerbate those difficulties. With appropriate training, intercultural assistants can provide a basic diagnosis because they do not experience a language barrier in their communication with children, but there is also no cultural barrier as they are able to recognize elements of culturally related behaviour patterns that may be mistaken for symptoms of disorder.

Actually, it's something like my own observation, so to speak, to work with the school pedagogue, perhaps with the class tutor, where the help is most needed. Because we have thirty nine such persons and rather each child feels it well and such assistant may rather understand if it is a language barrier or some Asperger syndrome, or if there are any other problems, which, actually, a Polish teacher is not able to immediately diagnose, because the child says nothing. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

Another challenge limiting the possibility of children to fulfil their aspirations is the organization of the 8th grade exams. From the assistant's perspective, despite the available adaptations, the examination sheet is too difficult as mentioned earlier by the teachers.

They just have half an hour more, at least my daughter had it. But when you can't write it, well that half an hour means... it means nothing. Half an hour more to write a language exam. I mean, the time added to the prescribed time limit. (PL\_F1\_M\_3\_F)

Intercultural assistants also present the difficulties in assigning children to particular classes (school year). Sometimes children are assigned according to their age in Poland despite the fact that they started their education in Ukraine a year earlier. In the case of many children this system works well, as the children have time to compensate for differences in curriculum and overcome the language barrier.

But sometimes a girl pupil in the seventh grade, she somewhat qualifies..., qualifies to be in the seventh grade, though she is supposed to have been in the ninth grade already, so that she should not take that exam, so she moved back a little. She was a good pupil and all that they do here, she did back at home, she just has a language barrier problem. She



catches up on it quickly, diligently does all the homework, behaves properly, has abilities and, in such atmosphere, she begins to make progress. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

With proper support, the children are able to catch up, achieve educational successes adequate to their abilities, similar to the time before their arrival in Poland. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that working with these children and explaining cultural differences requires a lot of time and commitment.

I mean the vocabulary, it's just those words that seemed to us, well, such most important ones, when a child comes to school: what a lesson means, what a break is, a lunch break, a school common room, what else was there? (PL\_F1\_M\_1\_F)

Most intercultural assistants indicated that they hardly noticed any difference between the adaptation process for boys and girls, however bringing up particular cases showed examples of such variations. One of the intercultural assistants pointed out to the stereotypical features of girls that they were more diligent than boys, attach more importance to learning and learn a lot. On the other hand, boys were perceived as easier establishing peer relationships via sports activities that play an integrating role.

... it seems to me that boys have slightly..., I mean, because girls have that inclination to buckle down to learning more and they are... well, in general, they are more diligent pupils. However, as regards relationships as such, establishing them and relations and integration with the group, well, it seems to me that boys are better off. I mean they also catch up faster with such relations than girls. So it seems to me, but I don't know, if that's the case. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_M)

### Socio-emotional functioning of migrant children

Intercultural assistants emphasize the role of peers, teachers, and parents in the social-emotional functioning of migrant children. A consequence of a lack of support in those relations can be mood disorders which require specialist help.

Polish children in such situations have them too when left on their own, and here when children from Ukraine are left alone, it's even double, or triple thing, since they are left alone, because there's a language barrier, and on top of that they're separated from the world, because they don't know the language, they don't have friends, and they're separated, too and also often receive some negative things, because they're different and are not accepted in the classroom and, simply, such child might just have very many psychological problems and depressions, and so on. (PL\_F1\_M\_1\_M)

In addition to difficulties in the integration process with peers, intercultural assistants also observe difficulties in the family relationships of these children. Often, in addition to working with the child and the teacher, assistants also work with parents to provide psycho-educational support, showing them the child's perspective and talking about the difficulties experienced by the child.

Well, madam, you have no right to punish that child. I, for example, for getting a 3 grade..., I would have given her a chocolate. Because, the kid must get some kind of reward, a reward for that... But she received punishment from her parents. And therefore, we sometimes must educate parents first— so they would be able to appreciate their own child, because when she is willing to learn, well, it's easier for her and for every teacher in the Polish school, right? And when the child is blocked by her parents, because mom is unsatisfied with such mark, so ... We, too, are such intermediaries – on one side and on the other, too. I'm sorry, for cutting in... (PL\_F1\_M\_4\_F)

In this statement, a different perspective on the role of the parent in the child's school achievement can be observed. In the case of children in schools attached to refugee centres, teachers emphasized the



importance of parental attitude and motivation valorising it positively. Here it can be seen that the excessive ambition of the parent can lead to a lack of understanding of the difficulties experienced by the child, of them not appreciating the child's achievements.

The intercultural assistants also emphasised the importance of peer relations. They pointed to the unique role of sports as a gender differentiator. They note that “from sports and physical education help boys very much. They go in for football, or some other, other sports” (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F) and “well, in general, such team games, [help] very much so. And if a boy arrives, who is so-so, who can play, and then a physical education teacher... helps” (PL\_F1\_M\_3\_F). The intercultural assistant from Vietnam emphasised that girls from Asian countries do not establish relationships easily:

as far as Asia is concerned, it is actually girls who have a very discrete approach, they would be open to new relations and contacts and so on, so I think that it has, it does have an impact, it's just like with an illness. It's also one of the factors, what I've observed, it's visible in the case of Vietnamese children. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_M)

## 5. Working with children and their families

### Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff

#### Polish language and remedial classes

Foreign children (until they acquire the requisite language fluency) and children from returning families (for a period of 12 months) have the right to participate in additional Polish language classes (from 2 to 5 hours per week, c.f. Educational Act). “There are additional Polish language classes for foreigners - I run them – and have a separate textbook for this purpose”. (PL\_T5\_M)

Yet all teachers stated that the regulations brought in by the Educational Act were insufficient and did not solve the problems of teaching more specialized subjects. For example, teachers mentioned a lack of proper textbooks or textbooks were not adjusted to the age of children. As a result, teachers' agency is manifested in employing their own, more engaging, teaching methods.

I started to teach her how to speak Polish. I started in my own way, teaching her sounds, teaching her the speech. (...) After a month this girl started to communicate (...) I work using such a system as I do not have a textbook for small kids, since I noticed that a lot of textbooks for the Polish language for foreigners are quite complicated, (...) they are designed for older kids, 9 years and older. I have a primer from which I copy some things and I copy for them lots of materials in general. The language should be taught in the way you teach children. So most of all sounds, we start talking, we have to hear the language and only later we introduce the grammar part. I have such a system and it works. (PL\_T6\_F)

They had Polish lessons all the time with a teacher of Polish for foreigners, extra classes. In third grade I had 5 more hours with them. And I must say it was great. We used those hours to the fullest. (PL\_T16\_F)

These classes are support for achieving children's educational aspirations. They lead to building a sense of empowerment by developing language competences, which later translates into e.g. opportunities to participate and understand the content of other subjects such as math, geography.

#### Methods of teaching

In order to make the teaching process easier for the children, the teachers employ various methods. The choice of a particular method depends on the subject and topic of the lesson.



If they don't understand Polish, how can I get them interested in another language? What methods should I use? I needed more materials, experience, cultural knowledge, and help. We tried to learn to respond to the needs of all groups: so that our [Polish] children would not lose, and the new children would learn, too. Now, it's good that there is the Internet, you can look for things. (PL\_ T13\_F)

One of teachers referred to her work with the youngest children and pointed out the importance of visual methods: "I treated them [migrant children] as kindergarten children at the beginning. They like kindergarten children do not understand, sometimes they do not speak. Perhaps that's why it was easier for me to work with those children, to use visual methods" (PL\_T9\_F). Other uses the method of contract to enhance their fulfilment of school tasks and stimulating their activity during the lesson: "We've prepared a class contract. There were 15-16 children at the time and the children signed it with their painted thumbs. (...) Now we start the year with an upbringing hour about what multiculturalism, tolerance is about" (PL\_T13\_F). Other teachers use, among others, group work, expository methods, discussion, problem-solving or teaching games.

One of the teachers stressed that in order to encourage students to learn, attention should be paid to pupils' interests, which will motivate them to learn the language and become diligent. That is why individual activating methods are employed to enhance language competences of children.

If we provide content, tools, and methods that are appropriate, it will be fun and attractive for these children, it will motivate them to spend their lessons actively. Then this knowledge will stay. We intuitively sense certain passions and hobbies and try to match them with tools and methods. In my opinion, it is important to find out who likes what, and who has passions. Then the child will be interested in acquiring these language skills, because this is the problem, the language. (PL\_T11\_F)

Also working in a mixed groups is used as a method of improving their Polish language skills and sharing knowledge between migrant and non-migrant children.

I also had a class with 5 migrant pupils for a short time. These were children from Chechnya, one girl from Crimea, two children from Ukraine. It is very hard to work then. For what methods do we use? In group work, we try to make sure that there is a foreign child in each group, so that they learn something from a Polish child. But if there are many children, it is difficult. (PL\_T12\_F)

Teachers often help children by offering them additional materials, frequently in a language other than Polish:

I prepared summary notes for the children, because you have to prepare lessons differently for them, different materials. They knew English very well, so the teachers who knew this language could communicate with them. But I don't know if this is a good direction, because this is a Polish school, and if they want to stay here, they have to learn Polish. (PL\_T6\_K)

Teachers - especially in schools located close to the centres for foreigners - adapt worksheets. They simplify them by introducing exercises which are based on completing sentences by connecting terms with definitions, more graphics or pictures. They also use formative teaching, which seems to be an effective form of support. Yet, some children who may have good cognitive resources and adequate support at home may not need as much adjustment.

But to customize everything for them, text or something, I didn't do it. If I saw there was a problem I would do it. But they did well. In my opinion they didn't need it. Apart from



that they could feel worse somehow if everything was customized for them every time. Against the backdrop of the group, they didn't fall behind, they were in the middle. The boy and the girl were even higher because they took part in math competitions, in school competitions. (PL\_T16\_F)

What seems to be important for the teachers is that all children should be treated as individuals. For example, for children whose Polish is not advanced, they assign smaller parts of materials to be learnt:

For him it is difficult because he does not know the historical context, I give him a smaller volume of material. At the beginning, he was even learning by heart, now I can see that he understands more, we use mind maps, work with source texts, there vocabulary is difficult even for children from Poland. (PL\_T5\_M)

Teachers also apply a grading system which is adjusted to the learning abilities of children and recognise the progress they make. As they admitted, the appreciation of their efforts, building on their strengths, is also valuable for enhancing children's self-esteem.

We have adopted this principle that we appreciate the efforts. We don't look at the language, but when put effort in learning, we appreciate it. We help as much as we can. Little boy from Tajikistan was motivated by this. He had bad notes at the beginning but later had a final annual certificate with honours. When I read it on stage, I cried and he did! I was so proud of him!

To a younger class a girl, the fifth, and she is also very active, wants to respond to the lesson is not closed in itself, when I ask someone to read she comes forward, I think you need to ask these children, because the child dares to learn to read, because these children should read aloud (PL\_T8\_F)

A systematic solution for all foreign children has been applied in the exam ending the 8<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>3</sup> which determines the further educational path of the child after elementary school. The teachers admitted that this exam reflects the linguistic and curricular problems experienced by migrant children and to minimize their impact on the exam's results, an adapted examination sheet with, among other things, shorter, simpler instructions were introduced. In addition, the children have more time and can use a bilingual dictionary. Nevertheless, the instructions on the worksheet are presented in Polish. When the level of Polish language development is still low, it is difficult for children to get a satisfactory exam result, which in turn implies a difficulty in recruitment to their dream schools. This is what a teacher from a school in the large city says:

The regulations do not foresee it being that difficult. (...) She will only have a dictionary, but it is a different vocabulary for example in math. And the examination sheet for foreigners is based on the readings that are supposed to be read in all European nations, but the African context is not taken into account. We would like the assistant to be present during the examination, but there is no chance for that. P. would have to have a certificate of special education, but she is a very intelligent girl, so there is not a chance for that. (PL\_T7\_F)

Undoubtedly, taking active steps to include children in the school environment strengthens their sense of agency, but also helps to achieve educational success and increase their motivation to learn. Similarly, the effort teachers put into supporting a child can translate into success on exams. Teachers in the big city observe the opposite trend. Children do not want special treatment, do not want to be given different

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<sup>3</sup>Children take exams in Polish, mathematics and English.



materials to complete than the rest of the children. Perhaps the children do not want to stand out. This may be related to the smaller number of children in the classrooms and the fear of feeling different.

### Openness and flexibility of teachers, building a safe atmosphere

It is helpful if teachers are flexible, open to supporting the child with their own resources, such as foreign language skills.

For example, mathematics, if a sentence is translated into English, she does very well. There was a nice example in chemistry, because the chemistry teacher taught it in English, bilingual, and she was doing great, but unfortunately the teacher resigned. (PL\_T16\_F)

Moreover, an important factor which helps children adapt and function in the school environment is the flexibility of a teacher. I use active methods, communicate with them in Russian as well. (PL\_T13\_F)

Teachers emphasized that it is easier to support younger children because they can learn through play. On the other hand, when working with older children, the teacher directly asked the children what they liked and disliked about the activities. This is an attitude that supports children's agency, allowing them to know their needs and follow them.

I learned how to work with them by experience. The children from Ukraine told me that they make a lot of plasticine at school. With small children we made letters and fruits from plasticine. We made an exhibition and signed these fruits. (...) I said that children can talk to me in Russian or draw if they cannot express themselves. (...) I ask the older ones to write what they like and what they don't like during the class, what needs to be changed. (...) They would like to have more multimedia presentations, speak more English. Active methods are obligatory! With younger ones it is more fun, more ideas. It is different with the older ones, because they have to write and it is more difficult. (PL\_T13\_F)

### Intercultural assistants

Intercultural assistants play an important role in both the schools in the large city and close to the centres for foreigners. They provide comprehensive educational support for children, but also for parents and teachers themselves. One of the teachers noted: ">>Chechnya<<[children from Chechenya] loves to sing and they got along with her" (PI\_T13\_F). The cultural assistant helps children to feel safe on school premises and allows communication in the children's language of origin which can be a great relief to them in terms of the cognitive load associated with foreign language immersion.

From the perspective of professionals working in the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre, intercultural assistants employed at schools play an important role in educational and emotional functioning. The incoming children are entitled to the support of such an assistant for one year. This is not obligatory; the school itself must apply for this kind of support to the leading authority.

I have a 7th grade boy, under my therapeutic care. A child who came with his parents from Georgia, a child with enormous speech development difficulties, where in Georgia he was treated as an intellectually disabled child, here he was diagnosed with aphasia (DLD), he receives support, and we managed to provide him with therapy in the counselling centre. He receives quite a lot of support at school, but I also know that without the intercultural assistant support this boy would not manage, he talks about it, he says how much he needs it, how much he counts on the assistant, it was clear that at some point it would end, and it was a difficult moment for the boy. (PL\_F1\_T\_3\_F)



According to the professionals working in the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre, intercultural assistants are a great support for teachers, children and parents, and sometimes also for the staff in the counselling centre. Their assistance has also been invaluable during distance learning. If there is an intercultural assistant at the school from which the child is enrolled, sometimes they help the parents throughout the procedure at the counselling centre, provide linguistic support during the psychological interview, or discuss the results of the meetings with a child.

### Specific work challenges for teachers

Teachers face many challenges when working with children with migration experience, but what needs to be emphasized is that those who work in schools close to the centres for foreigners are at risk of experiencing secondary traumatization (Coles, Mudaly, 2010). Many of the children and families who come to the centres are families who have gone through difficult experiences in their place of origin. Sometimes teachers become familiar with this information and learn the stories of these children, their parents, and entire families. What is challenging is the lack of psychological support in the form of supervision for these teachers, which can influence the onset of professional burnout, as well as the lack of adequate psychological support for the children themselves and their families.

### Working with the parents

When it comes to the parents of refugee children, teachers more frequently point to negative aspects of such collaboration. Nonetheless, some teachers would often also mention positive changes, which are linked to their decisions to settle in Poland and thus their better understanding of Polish culture.

I have to say that in the past it was harder to reach the parents of refugee children. Now parents very often participate in parental meetings, they respond when we ask for a telephone contact. This contact is provided through the electronic grade book, so the cooperation is better, I think. It has begun to be visible over the years. I think that there is better cooperation with those who live outside the refugee centre because these are people who plan a longer stay here. They often have jobs so their contact with the language is different. They care more about their children's better functioning in community. (PL\_T4\_F)

Another factor shaping an educational situation of migrant children is general difficulties with adaptation of migrant children's families to their staying in Poland. The first migrant families who came to this centre faced a challenge in adapting to their living and functioning in Poland since they did not know the cultural context. Today, the situation has changed. Migrant families who come to Poland have greater knowledge and also can gain knowledge from migrant families who are already here. (PL\_T5\_M)

Low interests of parents in their children's learning performance, school attendance, or, more broadly, educational aspirations are still the issues that are most frequently stressed.

Parental awareness of the need for education is low. Educating parents is difficult, and it seems to me that parental awareness would need to be refined. Parents don't always recognise the needs of children well, they don't always appreciate the need for education. If you ask children who their parents were in the home country, so when it comes to mothers you hear 'mom', which is because of the cultural role of women in society, which I envy. These are unfashionable words, but it is so wonderful how these women are appreciated by their husbands, their children, how happy, fulfilled they are. (PL\_T5\_M)

They stress, however, that when they are summoned to school, it is mothers who would most often appear.



On the other hand, teachers very positively assess the involvement of a majority of parents from Ukraine or Belarus in their children's education. They frequently support the ambitions of their children, sending them to various additional classes, inquiring about their children's progress, arriving to the appointments. They are supported in such activities by culture assistants, who work with their children: "mom.... is very demanding. She... it is something like, she wants to catch up vicariously with him. She looks for thousands of different activities for him... also at school. She looks for opportunities to offer him as many activities as possible. (PL\_T2\_F)

There are also difficult situations and children do not receive proper support from their parents. This is because the parents are overworked and their knowledge of Polish is poor. It must be stressed that while mentioning parents' involvement in the school life of their children it means mothers, their cultural roles – as they are always present and committed. Fathers, in principle, are absent from their children's education, which, as they explain, is related to their role of the sole breadwinner in the family, being overworked, pursuing a mission of accomplishing their migration goal, which is to improve the family's financial condition.

Language barriers are a factor that makes parents' relations with the teacher difficult. Economic and refugee migrants do not always know Polish or Polish patterns and cultural values, either. This produces certain conflicts. However, in the case of parents from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia factors relating to cultural affinity and geographical proximity act as facilitators. Socio-cultural and cognitive distances are evidently smaller than in the case of Muslim culture or religion.

The language is a barrier. Parents practically do not know Polish. I don't know if they can't learn, if they don't want to or if they don't need it. But the language is a big barrier. The daughter always translated. I said it in Russian as much as I could, and she translated the rest. Mom always said: I don't understand, I don't know. (PL\_T9\_F)

Parents don't necessarily know the Polish language. So perhaps they, I would put it blatantly, they can't deal with it. A pupil from the 7th or 8th grade or even the 6th grade can say to their parent 'this is like that', but the parent doesn't know if this lesson was sent in a link, or if it is online for groups (...). This parent is kind of limited because as they can't cope with it. (PL\_T14\_F)

The language is rarely a barrier in contacting parents. Generally, teachers speak Russian more or less. Google translator also works. (PL\_T5\_M)

Teachers working with refugee children and families stress that their traumatic experiences impact the course of such cooperation. In their opinion, both parents and children need support and assistance of psychologists. Such tasks are performed by numerous non-governmental organisations and this marks the first step towards their participation in social and cultural life.

One of the teachers (PL\_T1\_F) stressed that:

Parents are often affected by apathy, depression, learned helplessness, I'd call it like rather going in circles, out of their helplessness, sensing no influence on the reality and this is very much shared by their children, too... Children are handed over to the teacher's care, as the parents don't always have the time to look after their own kids. You simply cannot, in inverted commas – jump over those problems that exist in their families. We are dealing here with multi-child families. We, too, differently perceive this social phenomenon and they see it differently, as well, we are culturally different. You need a lot of understanding here and it seems to me that it'd require, I don't know, well, more talks. (PL\_T1\_F)

Parents' psychophysical state sometimes does not allow them to become involved in their children's school life, and their knowledge is insufficient to help their children in subjects they are taught at school.

## Social Workers

### Areas of work

The information on the frequency of working with migrant families shows that mass economic immigrants in Poland (most often from Ukraine and Belarus) show high efficiency in coping with integration on the labour market, in the self-organisation of their families and educational life of their children and in achieving economic and housing independence. As one of the social workers noticed, "they come and are left on their own" (PL\_SW9\_F), they do not look for help in Social Welfare Centres or Family Support Centres operating also at the local level. However, social workers admitted that mostly those who has just arrived in Poland need their support.

Most the work is done with people who are newcomers, who have no understanding of the Polish reality yet, they need to be introduced slowly into the situation of their host country, translate the regulations, principles of functioning, and carry out such a socio-cultural orientation as far as possible within such a limited environment as is a Centre for Foreigners. (PL\_SW10\_F)

Social workers provide psychological and economic assistance as well as help dealing with numerous adaptation barriers – both in the case of parents and children. The intersecting difficulties related to the course of adaptation, language barriers, obtaining residence status, encounters with administrative institutions, looking for a flat, helping to strengthen the subjectivity of children and parents, as well as the challenges faced by working with a social worker are some of the problems social workers need to deal with. They are illustrated in the following narrative of one of the social workers:

There, it was more a question of the kids getting adapted at school, of learning Polish, because the kids had a big problem with adapting. And placing them in some peaceful place. After leaving the camp, these people are basically left in the lurch, there is nothing much for them, some cities offer some social housing, but there is none in [name of a city] (...) So we helped them in finding some relatively cheap accommodation, so that the kids could have some extra lessons at school, some tutoring. Because they were enrolled in a Polish school and actually we didn't know what would happen to them, they didn't understand anything at school, they didn't know what was going on. As far as she was concerned, first of all we were looking for a psychologist who would be able to communicate with her, because she spoke Polish, but with different accents, so sometimes it was difficult, because she didn't really understand what was said to her. (...). It was much more difficult to talk to the man, because he was withdrawn to anything. (PL\_SW6\_F)

Overcoming language barriers in contacts with different institutions, including social assistance centres is another area of support. They are caused either by insufficient knowledge of Polish language (e.g. difficulties to communicate, difficulties in writing a letter to the office for foreigners) or ignorance of administrative system in Poland. Social workers also provide assistance in going through the legalisation procedures and obtaining social benefits migrant families are entitled to (such as Family 500+). They help with lengthy procedures to legalise the stay, dealing with a sense of loneliness, low efficiency of actions. However, their permanent support may hinder migrants' independence:

Migrants are often ignorant of the procedures that apply to them and of benefits they are entitled to, despite having no residence card extended. On the one hand, it is an institutional practice that allows families to survive, but on the other hand it leads to permanent dependence on institutions. (PL\_SW10\_F)



Social workers also support women who experience violence. This problem has become especially visible during the pandemic and social workers noted that they are working with more families with a Blue Card.

I used to work with a mother, she had a blue card, the mother was Ukrainian, and the father of those children was Polish. They had a Blue Card. This situation had developed so much that she moved out of there. I assigned a family assistant service there, because the children had school and emotional problems. During the Blue Card procedure, many things turned out. Unfortunately, there was physical and psychological violence, she separated from her partner. She moved in with her children. She worked all the time. There was therapeutic, psychological support. The story ended positively. (PL\_SW4\_F)

### Social needs and the sources of vulnerability/security of migrant children

As regards migrant children, social workers point out to a strong link between their sources of vulnerabilities and the economic situation of their family, the legal status of their residence, or their situation related to being refugees and waiting for permanent residence. The main sources of vulnerability include: parents' adaptation difficulties, language problems, legal right to reside in Poland, parental agency of children, problems with education and adjustment at Polish schools, parents' interest in their children's education and the impact of the pandemic on remote education.

When it comes to working with migrant children, there are specific challenges related to overcoming language barriers and organising additional Polish language classes, expanding knowledge about cultural and gender aspects, especially when it comes to matters related to domestic violence and patriarchal behaviour, providing information about the support offered by community centres as well as offering assistance by intercultural assistants.

### Tools and measures

Social workers have noted an increasing number of migrants in Poland and thus migrant families under the care of social workers. From their perspective, there are a number of institutional constraints that make it difficult to provide adequate support to families with migration experience. These include insufficient measures and programmes which are unadjusted to migrants' needs:

There are more and more migrant families in Poland, and we are not quite there; it is a bit like wandering around in a fog. There are more and more people with whom we must work. In my opinion, we have absolutely no tools. I mean, we do have some tools, but they are faulty and there is no institution, no person who can help to guide a family through this system of administration from the beginning, to go all the way through in the offices. (PL\_SW9\_F)

They indicate a need to change the standards of work with such families and to be given the requisite tools to work with them. At the moment, they are unprepared for an influx of migrants to Poland. One of the respondents states that "standards of work for social workers limit the possibilities of action" (PL\_SW7\_F). This is especially visible in the case of migrants with an undocumented stay or lack of extension of the residence card who are outside the system. This can be seen as systemic discrimination:

We have legal difficulties in providing assistance to migrant families who do not have a residence card. You know, the Act on Social Assistance provides that those who are legally residing in Poland can benefit from such assistance. And not all Ukrainians have it. Besides, please tell me, how is it, how are they to cooperate with us and then wait for another residence card? It also depends on reasons for getting the card, but there may be times when they don't get the card right away and legally, we shouldn't deal with them. Then we work illegally (laughs). (PL\_M\_F)



Social worker support is significantly affected by the language barrier. To be able to develop a trusting relationship, a good command of the migrants' language is required. To overcome this barrier, social workers insisted either on relying on an interpreter when working with migrant families or taking a language course. On the other hand, they perceive that it could affect the quality of contact with families.

Yes, I think that would be very cool. Here it was a good thing that you understood something. (...) In our MOPS nobody sends us to language courses or sponsors them, so it's hard for us to speak every language fluently. A translator would certainly make communication easier. On the other hand, it is another person disturbing the family. (PL\_SW3\_F)

Another problem concerns insufficient cooperation with other institutions to provide a complete support. Although there are some cases of such cooperation, in general social workers noted that there is room for improvement in this area:

In my opinion, there is a lack of cooperation between institutions, which should have more fluid contact with each other. From such structures on the territory of [name of a city]. City Hall to some schools, to broader institutions. There is a lack of a total network of cooperation. Many people point this out. (PL\_SW1\_M)

### Bureaucracy

Another challenge that probably also accompanies teachers and counsellors is the excessive bureaucracy that results in a lack of time to intervene.

I think that the bureaucratic system in Poland is very complex, and this means that we cannot concentrate on solving a particular situation. It takes a very long time to get help, sometimes a month, a month and a half, when you need help now. (PL\_SW1\_M)

### Social workers' competences

Additionally, social workers highlighted a subjective feeling of a lack of competence to work with migrant families, both in terms of better understanding of cultural differences, psychological aspects of migration and language skills. They also complained about a lack of intercultural training for social workers, who need to broaden their knowledge and practical skills in order to enable them to better address the migrants' needs.

I'm afraid to go beyond some of my competences. We are very limited in our actions. We can grant strictly material or psychological help. (PL\_SW9\_F)

I do not feel that I have any substantive supervision over my work with foreigners. I feel that I have to develop myself in order to be able to work with such families. (PL\_SW5\_F)

There is further such a thing that divisions are created. There was no such attitude that something can be a psychological predisposition, only that they are from Ukraine and that's how it is there. Once a year there should be such workshops devoted to, let's say, the issue of other nations, other countries, but from the point of view that what happens to those people in our country is not a result of the fact that we have to explain their behaviour, not to educate how it should look like in our country, because it is a result of their culture, but to what extent we allow them to do what is negatively perceived. (PL\_SW3\_F)

### Professional challenges

Just like with teachers at schools close to the centres for foreigners, the topic of burnout also comes up in the case of social workers. The situation of migrant families is complex and also requires a lot of time,



attention, additional work in free time and additional competences, it can lead to burnout. This occurs especially in situations when the worker feels that his/her field work with the family is not providing results and when families are granted funding, even if they do not fulfil the requirements, e.g. changes in parenting style, getting a job.

It seems to me that over time people just don't want it anymore. I have been working here for only 3 years, but they get families used to it, so that nothing is required, and then the management says "Why bother, you won't get anything out of it anyway". Getting used to what it is. And I as a young worker would like to change that. But also with time, after these three years, I will come up with something, and even if the lady doesn't agree, I will hear that I should still grant help. Because how could I not. She is a migrant, a refugee. And the truth is that her children will grow up soon, like the lady from Iraq, and then she will get almost nothing from us. (PL\_SW4\_F)

It should be noted that several social workers highlighted the positive aspects of the job. These featured when they were actually able to help families, e.g. in dealing with the procedures to legalise their stay, assist them in adaptation.

For me these are very different experiences. On one hand, this work is very developing. Because you often have to deal with different barriers, like language barriers. I have never been good at languages. (...) The second thing which perhaps is not problematic, but developing for me as an employee, are the cultural differences. (...) I have to learn about these cultural differences, because I cannot impose our culture, our social standards, because I have to understand their culture and where their behaviour comes from. On one hand, it's developing, but on the other, it's quite difficult for me. (PL\_SW5\_F)

They perform work that requires continuous improvement and learning about different cultures, their rules, and patterns that are helpful in approaching migrant families.

### Intercultural assistants

#### Daily work: tasks, roles, and tools to work with children

Intercultural assistants are aware of the importance of their work and its multi-tasking nature. They define themselves as teachers, helpers, translators, organisers, service providers, who carry out the work with great commitment. Assistants refer to multi-faceted roles that involve offering support not only in learning specific subjects, but also in enhancing students' agency in relationships with teachers, educators, students in the classroom, and the wider community.

As already noted, there are differences in the number of children that cultural mediators work with, which ranges from 15 to 4. Most often they look after several children in different classes at one school. During regular teaching, intercultural assistants sit next to a child during classes and provide direct support in the learning process. They serve as interpreters during classes so migrant children can understand the topic, prompt words, check tasks, and respond directly to the child's needs. In order to properly support a migrant child, they adopted a holistic view of working with them. It not only involves the child, but also the school system, its organisation, the family system, support policies provided by specialists: the school principal, educator, psychologist, and other teachers. For example, they work with a child and his/her parents from the beginning, by preparing a glossary of words which are useful when a child arrives at a new school and a calendar with important school events. Such an approach often means that they do "invisible work" which exceeds their contacted working time.

I don't spend that much [time] at school, say, four hours a day. I prepare for lessons, because before I go to a classroom, I have to... I have textbooks, first I have to prepare my



vocabulary. Because even now, during on-line [lessons], I am texting and simply sending translated text messages, translations, and translations. This way it works very well. However, it takes a while. Nobody counts that, and talking to parents, right? (PL\_F1\_M\_3\_F)

Because here, this work has many sides and it's different work, various things are important. Well, one of the main ones is just help, helping the child to adjust. And... how to say that – it's most important and to help in becoming familiar, familiar with the language. And the third thing is also helping parents to learn how to get along in relations, so that it helped the child, and not to be an obstacle, in learning and adjusting. Because, if you leave parents out, then they will not, or cannot help and then they may be in the way, or they want to help very much and also are in the way, because they try to help their way, or are indifferent and so that, too... (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_M)

The way in which they work facilitates the adaptation of children, overcoming language barriers and strengthening the agency of the whole family, in particular children.

We do it in a way so that the child could be independent without an assistant. That is: make the parents become involved at school by any means so that they participated. Just like Polish parents do, so that the child could learn how to learn. (...) And when such a connection is made – between a child, a teacher, and parents, then you can stay away. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

In general, intercultural assistants work independently, and the process of working with each student is essentially formulated by them. They work on particular cases and develop a workplan for each child individually. Intercultural assistants use their own migration experiences and those of their children to work in the best possible way. For some intercultural assistants, it is important to work with the family, because the success of a migrant child at school and their further integration in society depends on the results of this work.

I'd actually look at it from another point of view, because my function here is first to introduce a family into a new environment. (...) I first work with parents. I have a daily contact with them and have had it for all those (...) This is a role of the assistant rather than a teacher, let's say that, a teacher assistant, who is a link between culture A and culture B. And that's why we must engage parents in that work, because, let's be frank, it's not some occasional job, it's rather work... I look at everybody here as a hero, because actually those ladies contribute so much to work, and that friend with that booklet ... How much, how much love she puts into... (laughter) in those tasks that she proposed to those poor foreigners. (PL\_F1\_M\_3\_F)

### Language and communication with children and parents

All intercultural assistants raised the issue of language barriers, which are the key to enhancing children's agency and achieving educational success. To provide support to children, they use their own linguistic competences, using both Polish language and children's mother tongue. The latter shortens distances between children and cultural assistants, making children feel at ease and creating trust, while the former due to completed courses in teaching Polish as a foreign language which gives them a solid basis for enhancing children's knowledge.

Some intercultural assistants highlighted the insufficient involvement of parents and problems with communication with them due to lack of their response to the messages sent by school. To engage parents in the education of their children, the intercultural assistants applied various strategies such as asking them to come to school and working out the rules of cooperation or being in contact on the phone.



We have such conditions [when we work] on-line, like unread messages sent via Librus [an electronic grade book], I don't call them every day asking to respond to the message, only sometimes, if there are any questions, how they go along, what help they need and often parents do not report any educational needs, as concerns older children at school. But if issues accumulate, there are lots of backlogs, then it's worth communicating that to parents and tell them about things, what help they need in such, such kind of situations. (...) And as concerns meetings, when parents used to come to meetings, I was also available there, I attended those meetings and so that they could sign things during my office hours, a declaration of adaptation, then... Because now, these declarations are available during office hours, so parents come and sign them. So I, too, sometimes come to school and explain them what they actually are, where to sign them, so as not to come twice. This is how things with parents look like. (PL\_F1\_M\_4\_F)

The insufficient involvement of parents, especially overworked parents who came to Poland to improve their economic situation, should be seen in a wider socio-economic context. These parents are often alone, separated from their families, and all the burden of responsibility is on their shoulders. Pursuing economic activity does not always allow them to take care of all the children's affairs, and very often due to language barriers they are unable to provide substantive help.

The intercultural assistants discussed how difficult it was to inform parents about the inappropriate behaviour of their child and explain the reasons for such behaviour. Many misunderstandings arise in such situations. Therefore, some children's behaviour at school needs to be clarified and parents should be prepared for appropriate reactions, especially when the child's arguments are untrue. Sometimes a child's behaviour requires the attention and interest of others, parents included. It also requires working with an educator in the case of school violence. It is worth citing the following examples provided by the interviewees:

Depending on what problem there is. If there is a problem at school, so we go, and give information from the teacher to parents. When a parent has [a problem] ... if a child has some problem with school, with peers, then a parent can report it. That they have a problem... I've had such a boy. At the beginning we would visit pedagogues every day, so every day there was some row, fighting, we all thought that it was him, who was pestered by somebody, and then actually it turned out that he just wanted some attention to be paid to him in that way. And he would relate at home every such situation as if it were some kind of unbelievable discrimination, or different things they did to him there. But me, however, after each such meeting with the pedagogue, I had to call the parents and explain what was happening... (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

## 6. Framing integration and evaluating policies

### Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre's staff

The question of the definition of integration, its subjective perception or conditions, was not easy. They noticed that the number of migrant children is increasing, so in their opinion it is necessary to build up systemic measures, to prepare the schools for the arrival of migrant students, not only to be active when a migrant child already arrives at school. Moreover, they see the risk of ad hoc actions - if there is no action plan, there is a danger that if there are not really many migrant children, any action will keep being postponed.



There will be more and more children of this type, so we need to prepare for it. Our school is such an open school, there are new foreigners coming in and this proves that the integration is there, that the children feel good at our school. (PL\_T7\_F)

If foreigners appear in a particular school in such a way that they are single students, there is such a danger that they are marginalised, that they are overlooked, that there is no person to take care of them systemically. (PL\_T1\_F)

At the same time, teachers indicated and warned against systemic inequalities. They were convinced that small schools in rural areas are much less likely to receive support for the integration of migrant children than schools in large cities, which is not necessarily due to ill will, but e.g., easier access to specialists, workshops and trainings or higher number of NGOs dealing with the education of children with a migrant background.

Small schools which are places in small villages have less support than in schools in big cities like Krakow or Warsaw (workshops, conferences, NGO presence). (PL\_T14\_F)

The city authorities which decide on financial resources have an influence on the education situation of the children. They determine the amount of money passed to the school. In rural areas there are fewer opportunities, they do not provide sufficient help for children (language, cultural, psychological). (PL\_T9\_F)

### Cooperation with institutions

To date, teachers do not have much experience of working with different institutions. They stressed that the intercultural assistants were very important in supporting migrant children and helping them to integrate.

I support this position [intercultural assistant] and advised my colleagues to hire one. And in fact, more and more schools employ such assistants. People do not even know about it, because even in the educational law there is no such thing as a cultural assistant. There is an assistant for Asperger's, for children with disabilities, but there is no assistant for children who come from different countries. (PL\_T7\_F)

At the same time, respondents face difficulties with hiring intercultural assistants. The first obstacle is the authority (municipality) which is reluctant to give such permission because of the costs. Assistants are employed on a part-time basis and rather in order to work with migrant children from culturally distant countries than, for example, from Ukraine. It reveals the assumption that pupils from post-Soviet countries can manage on their own or only with the support of the subject teachers and class teacher.

First, I tried to get an assistant for her [the Nigerian pupil]. I hadn't thought of getting an assistant for Ukrainian children before. However, I contacted [name] and she told me that I could apply to the Department of Education [of municipal office] for a full-time position for such a cultural assistant. I was granted half-time, i.e. 20 hours. (PL\_T7\_F)

I hired her as and administrative staff member. As such she should have [had she worked full time] 40 hours/week. But they [the city council] only gave me 20 h. She devotes 20 hours only to be physically present at school, she helps P to connect with children and so on. But the whole work of translating the classes and documents into English, and also personal contact with P – it is all voluntary work. (PL\_T7\_F)

Moreover, some officials are not aware of the importance of the work of intercultural assistants and what exactly their role is. Teachers themselves are not always positive about the assistant's activities in the classroom. This may be because of the limited number of hours he or she spends in the school, as



mentioned above, and because it is not possible to agree precisely on how to work and cooperate with the subject teacher.

There was also a cultural assistant, but for children coming from Turkey. He was also Turkish, he sat with these children in class. From my observation and from other teachers' opinions, this assistant was not necessarily helpful. He was interrupting, asking questions, basically breaking up the flow of the lesson. I was not in this class, here it would be worth asking the opinion of the teacher. (PL\_T10\_F)

Other mentioned institutions, organisations or professionals include psychologists, other schools (e.g. if another school already has experience with migrant or refugee children, the teachers are eager to establish contacts), or NGOs that support migrants, work with families, or offer assistance to schools. In the case of refugee children, it was also important to cooperate with the centre for foreigners to better identify needs and coordinate support. The centre's staff have considerable experience of working with refugee children, and they also have a better insight into the children's family situation, economic condition and cultural background. They also work with children and parents over a longer period of time and interact with them in a variety of situations, not just the specific context of the school classroom and lessons.

He [migrant child] has been attending weekly classes with a psychologist to support his emotional development. This year he is going individually to a psychologist. (PL\_T8\_F)

I find the cooperation with the Association for the Earth [NGO] the best. It is an organisation that seems to have direct contact with refugees, knows their needs and responds to them. (PL\_T1\_F)

We work with refugee centres, we have a lot of contact with Bialystok, where school number 26 has a lot of these children and they give us materials on a regular basis, they come with parcels of books that we can use to introduce them to the language even more. (PL\_T11\_F)

Teachers also pointed out the need to cooperate with the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in certain situations. We will discuss this form of cooperation in more detail later in this report (in the social worker section), since teachers only mentioned situations where the school reports a risk of child neglect (which is not only the case for migrant children).

Although teachers are necessarily used to the challenge of micro-level integration resting on their shoulders, they recognised and indicated the benefits of inter-institutional cooperation. They said that it would be most beneficial to form task forces to look for solutions, perhaps not only when there are already problems, but also in advance. Unfortunately, the main barrier is the difficulty in obtaining financial resources, as schools have so far financed such initiatives on their own.

Certainly, those additional solutions that can be put in place. The most important thing is to systemically take care of these kids. To adjust the exam or exempt them from the exam. There should be a team that works out these solutions. There needs to be finances. Everything that is done in school is done at your own expense. It would be great not to be limited in that way. To have extra motivation to work. (PL\_T10\_F)

### Integration concepts

Teachers do not relate integration questions to macro-level situations or political concepts. Their perceptions of integration and their conceptions of it are also related to their daily work in the classroom and if they do exceed them, it is in principle only by extending the issue to the local community.



For one of the teachers working with refugee children, the concept of integration goes beyond the school walls. For her, the integration process meant not only involving migrant pupils in school activities, but also in the local community. In her opinion, despite initial difficulties, over the years both pupils and residents of the town have become accustomed to the presence of refugees and migrants, today they consider them a part of the community. She drew attention to the process of the normalisation of their presence, which is based on mutual respect and tolerance of customs, culture, and religion. The respondent invoked the concepts of tolerance, normality and respect to describe the integration process, but rarely referred to specific experiences. When asked about specific practices, she most often indicated school activities that enable migrant children to talk about their culture, cuisine, and the history of their country. The latter suggestion - the introduction of intercultural education topics into the daily work of the school - also appeared in other interviews. These statements, however, suggest that teachers focus mostly on cultural aspects of integration, rather than tackling the difficult topics of meaningful difference, power relations, stereotypes, and discrimination. They tend to present desirable situations in their statements, avoiding referring to difficulties, including those related to the relationship between host and migrant pupils: "It's about doing many things together. Getting to know each other. To play together" (PL\_T12\_F).

Most of the teachers declared an open approach, stressing that they do not differentiate between children, that they want them to feel accepted. As one teacher emphasised, "What is important is the relationship, not the methods used in education, they do not play such a primary role here"(PL\_T1\_F). The same teacher is one of the few people who made the effort to try to formulate a definition of integration based on reciprocity and respect:

Integration is an activity whose aim is the mutual enrichment of two different nationalities, or in other words the feeling that I give something from myself, that I share something, but I also experience such trust. My personality is enriched, my life becomes more colourful, my perspective on the world broadens. Integration is a win-win situation (PL\_T1\_F).

It should be noted, however, that such declarations can - and often do - lead to an assimilationist attitude, an expectation to "blend in" with the Polish community, rather than to recognise or support the process of hybrid identity formation. As one teacher pointed out "We are not an easy country to nurture Otherness" (PL\_T6\_F). However, there are also calls to keep things separate, not to take any special steps to introduce children to each other's cultures, but to let things run their course. It often means that teachers play down the role of culture of origin, at least in the school environment. As a result, these processes show that teachers are unaware of the fact that integration means both processes: maintaining ties with the culture of origin and accepting a new one.

Our goal as far as integration is concerned is to show her that she is fully accepted (...) and at the same time show her what is nice, what she might like. But we cannot impose anything on her, because she will not accept that, only as a gift. (PL\_T19\_F)

### Integration programs

When asked about integration programmes, teachers mostly declared a lack of knowledge about such activities. However, after this preliminary statement, no one indicated activities on a scale broader than the individual school, but events and activities undertaken as part of schoolwork, either by teachers or by intercultural assistants, were described. For example, in relation to the integration measures, one of the teachers mainly described what she was doing during the lessons. She spoke about the fact that the school had developed an action strategy to include migrant pupils, e.g., by organising events common to all classes 4 or events in classes (such as bonfires) to integrate children with each other. In addition, the school celebrates Refugee Day by organising a performance in which migrant and non-migrant children take part. As a Polish language teacher, she also uses the same material processed during classes so that children can talk about their countries and cultures. She did not mention any top-down solutions.



I do not know about such programmes. The school provides care of an educator, psychologist, has contact with parents of a foreign child, has the possibility of direct contact with the headmaster and teachers, however, I do not know anything about detailed programmes. (PL\_T1\_F)

We must also implement these educational activities, so that these children are accepted, so that they can talk about their culture. We are doing various actions, we have even published a cookbook with the refugees, some recipes, some history of the country. (PL\_T12\_F)

To sum up, there is no strong opinion about applying integration programs, the teachers are rather convinced that integration “happens naturally between children” (PL\_T16\_F), at most with the support of the school/teachers. Integration is reduced to on the spot actions, with no systemic dimension in the teachers' perception.

### Social workers

#### Integration concepts

The most important comment, repeated by practically all social workers, is the lack of a holistic, coherent integration programme for migrants, even though there are more and more migrants and an increasing number of challenges with the presence of migrant families. They are convinced that although there is a clear trend of a growing number of migrant families requiring support from social workers, there is still no overall approach, families are somehow “plugged in” to the general pool of families requiring support and at risk of social exclusion, and specific problems or challenges are already solved individually by the respective social worker. Social workers also stress that the activities of the City Welfare Centre are regionalised, so that if a family changes residence, it comes under the jurisdiction of a different branch, and it is necessary to re-establish contact, which is sometimes very difficult.

Analysing the statements of the social workers concerning their personal definitions of the integration of migrants, they define it in two ways. Some social workers understand integration as adaptation to the culture of the host country, and therefore refer to it in a somewhat assimilationist way. One interviewee emphasised the ease of working with migrants who are close to, or able to “fit into”, the European culture.

And in the case of this family with this gentleman from Russia, with whom I had to deal. Being in contact with them, I did not feel any difference. I felt so European. (...), he was very involved, he got into our culture and our rules of functioning. (...). In the case of that [SW describes another family who she was working with] family, the claim was more noticeable. They demanded, even demanded support from us. That this is a family, these are children, that they need, that we should provide for them. And in the case of the other [third] family with whom I had contact, it was a completely different level. They were already inscribed in our culture in a more European way. They did not feel their different nationality. (PL\_SW8\_F)

The second concept of integration indicated that it is a matter of peaceful coexistence, without assimilation. Social workers representing this viewpoint emphasized that integration is “learning about each other's cultures, norms and values, and accepting each other” (PL\_SW3\_F). Lack of knowledge causes communication problems, leading to stereotypical judgments and inciting prejudice.

I would like to see integration in such a way that the people who come here simply live well in this country. We should all be able to coexist in a way which does not offend anyone. I would not like integration to be such that we make the people who come here look like each other. I would not like us to turn the people who come to Poland into Poles.



This is not how it should work. I would like us to be able to coexist in a nice way.  
(PL\_SW7\_F)

Social workers could not identify too many programmes or activities aimed at the integration of migrants. They are familiar with the so-called Individual Integration Plan addressed to persons receiving refugee status, while they were convinced that there were no such activities towards economic migrants. In addition, despite the positive evaluation of this programme, social workers underlined that the end of the programme means the end of the support - there was no further offer, and migrants themselves have fears and concerns related to institutional contact.

As far as migrants are concerned, we quite often receive families, sometimes individuals, who already have a status in Poland and then we run an individual integration programme. And these are long-term activities. With individual integration programmes, it's usually signed for a year and it's a comprehensive support to cope here and to adapt to life in Poland. (...) However, in the case of the individual integration programme, these goals are set at the very beginning. The person comes, we decide exactly what he or she wants, how to make the most of the year, so that he or she can acclimatize. (PL\_SW7\_F)

With regard to children, they highlighted activities that include children from families at risk of exclusion, regardless of their background, e.g. a feeding programme. Children may also become beneficiaries of so-called Local Activity Programs aimed at activating a specific local community. However, these programs are targeted more broadly; there are no programs aimed directly at migrant families or the children of migrant families. Social workers are convinced that there is no need - after all, among the families they work with, migrants are still few in number, so there would not be enough takers. They pointed out that migrant families can benefit from general programs, but at the same time they observed that not many of them choose to do so.

There are no such programmes, because I don't think there is much demand for such programmes either. As far as the Roma minority is concerned, I have seen a lot of such programmes, as far as professional activation is concerned, as far as kindergartens for Roma are concerned. However, there are not many of these kinds of things for foreigners. We simply wouldn't have any takers, it would be hard to do something, if there is just one family. But if it does happen, it is directed to our broad programmes for everyone. There is no such thing as programmes strictly for a certain group. (PL\_SW1\_M)

### Cooperation with institutions

Referring to cooperation with institutions, social workers especially underlined the lack of transparency in the support system for migrants / migrant families. They themselves have opportunities to cooperate with institutions and use them, but if a migrant family does not have a "guide", e.g. a social worker or a family assistant, it will be very difficult for them to find out where to look for support in which situation: "There is no institution, no person who can help guide a family through this system of administration from the beginning, of going through all the offices" (PL\_SW8\_F). Cooperation with institutions therefore, on the one hand, helps guide through the institutions and procedures necessary for e.g. obtaining financial support. The second path of cooperation results from the necessity to intervene in case of difficulties, and here in the case of adult family members there are e.g. the courts or the police, especially because of the domestic violence or other problems (e.g. related to access to doctors, the implementation of compulsory education, the need for educational support or actions to promote greater family cohesion and better fulfilment of the family's caring and upbringing functions). As the social workers indicated, there are also very difficult situations such as children being forced to beg.



She came to us from a police report. Because it turned out that there was a quarrel and there were already some fights going on. And I have a feeling that we are not able to work out with them how to solve these problems among themselves, but they always need a mediator to bring them together and try to explain how this conversation should look like. (...) And she doesn't seem to understand at all that she could file documents and just remove him from the family. Besides, some threats started to come into play, because he said that yes, their daughters would stay, but he was taking their son away. It's not good, but the family is still under the supervision of the probation officer, the court and the police. (PL\_SW7\_F)

It was such a specific family, it started with the intervention of the school, that the children did not go to school, that they were seen in the market, that they sold things there, that they engaged in begging. (PL\_SW2\_F)

In the case of children, there is cooperation with schools and especially school pedagogues or psychological-educational counselling centres. The reason is usually parental neglect in the case of migrant families also due to cultural differences (e.g. because of gender roles). The cooperation can be initiated either by the social worker/family assistant or by the school.

As a rule, I initiate cooperation with schools. If there are worrying signs in a child, the school writes to the Municipal Social Welfare Office or to the court to ask for an interview with the family. Then a social worker goes for such an interview and understands the situation. What support, if any, the family would need. (PL\_SW1\_M)

As already mentioned, this is also a problem when families move from one place to another. Although the documents are transferred to another branch of the same institution, there is no cooperation and no exchange of experience that could be beneficial for the family.

There they were directed by me to this second social work team, there someone started to supervise them, so these children went to school more regularly, but then they moved, and I don't know what happened to them. (PL\_SW5\_F)

The need for intervention may also arise in situations where children do not do well in school, e.g., because they do not yet have the requisite language skills. If the family is under the care of a social worker, they are also involved in addressing this situation. They act as intermediaries, helping to find the right people to help or places where such help can be provided to a migrant family.

The other Ukrainian family, where the lady first came alone to work, then she brought her two children, most of the family stayed in Ukraine. (...) And they came to us because the boy had a problem with his vocabulary. (...) So the boy wasn't always able to name things properly, he had problems with these subjects, with biology, geography, Polish too, because his skills were not very good. He was here for a year. The school made a request, we looked for various institutions that could help. (PL\_SW4\_F)

Whatever the reason, an essential method of cooperation with the school is the formation of an interdisciplinary team, the identification of needs and the evaluation of the implementation of the set activities. Such a team includes teachers, therapists, educators, sometimes even doctors, and also volunteers working with children (PL\_SW3\_F). Social workers are very positive about this way of working. It has to be noted, however, that it is not unique to migrant families, but to all families under the care of the Centre. It is therefore not surprising that when asked directly about ways to support specifically migrant children at school, social workers cannot name them.

I have never encountered any resistance from the school, there are such interdisciplinary teams organised, consisting of specialists who work with families. In a more problematic



situation, a meeting of such a team is convened and actions are planned. It is a nice thing to do as these actions are coherent and are distributed among the people present at the meeting (...) if there is a possibility of sharing the work, it is very good as it is more beneficial for the family. (PL\_SW3\_F)

Only a few social workers had knowledge of additional Polish language classes or the work of intercultural assistants. This proves that the support systems are not integrated - social workers only deal with problem families, it is already an intervention situation, therefore they do not know about programmes which can be preventive.

Well, these are additional classes to make up for the material. Because for various reasons children may miss some classes or they may be behind in their work due to lack of understanding of the Polish language. Often pedagogues or tutors support such children. (...) I know there are also those cultural assistants, but I've never delved into it, so I can't say anything more. (PL\_SW3\_F)

Among other institutions they work with, social workers pointed to specialists when a specific type of support is needed (e.g., therapists or doctors to help an autistic child) and NGOs: [name] Association, which supports children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion by conducting educational, sports and therapeutic activities, [name] Foundation, which supports migrants coming from Ukraine, and [name] Association or [name] Foundation, which conduct aid activities (e.g., organizing Christmas packages) and educational activities.

[name of organization], they treated the children with understanding, with their needs. The [name] Foundation has a day care centre here at[address]. Various community centres. They were also very nice and understood the problem of helping the children with their learning and language problems. Especially that some of them already employ Ukrainian instructors. There is also the Hidden Wings Foundation, which is kind of a backyard foundation, but they are also willing. Besides, they have either an instructor or a volunteer, I don't remember, who is Ukrainian. But I think [name] already has one. More and more various institutions, because of the number of people coming from over the border, have some kind of person in their structures, who is able to understand the culture and language, to bring people closer. (PL\_SW4\_F)

In conclusion, the social workers cooperate with many institutions. This is primarily because the opportunities for support are scattered - there is no single place where a migrant family can get all the necessary information or help, on the contrary it is necessary to apply in many different places. Secondly the cooperation is necessary, because the help of the social worker is, as they themselves say, the beginning, the minimum support, they have to do the activities, which provide the migrant families with a sense of security.

To do more, it's all about cooperation between institutions. We ourselves as a centre generally take care of the basic things, it seems to me. We rather provide security. (PL\_SW7\_F)

### Intercultural assistants

In the interview with the intercultural assistants, as with the teachers and social workers, reflections on integration policies or state-level solutions did not emerge. However, the opinions of the assistants show the inconsistency of systemic measures and the lack of integration concepts. While their work is premised on a system of support for migrant children, the implementation of this premise encounters enormous difficulties.



Intercultural assistants see themselves as supporting children on the one hand, but also whole families and teachers on the other. They often defined themselves as intermediaries, persons available in case of need. In terms of cooperation, they pointed in particular to schools that approach them with the needs of migrant pupils, organising meetings with parents in cooperation with the assistants to improve communication.

We're kind of like intermediaries ....

We'll see if that's actually the case, now it's coming to the end of the semester and we'll see if later on there's not going to be this: and please this here, and please that there. Still the one of who comes up with the contact to the parents. Now on Monday I have a meeting with parents and with students. The school has come up with an initiative. (PL\_F1\_M\_4\_F)

The second institution is the municipality on which the assistant's employment depends. Here, assistants tended to report a lack of cooperation, casual employment, limited hours, or no employment during holidays. It is difficult to perform well under such conditions.

I'd also like to add that the fact that I work only till June is a problem [MW: employment contact does not cover holidays]. I worked like that and this year I've been working like that, too. Well, it's hard to work without any prospects, especially, when you're at certain age, you're not a university student, have a family, and have no stability. We cannot take a housing loan, and not to mention the salary... I perhaps work better than others, in full time employment, and that's forty hours. (PL\_F1\_M\_1\_M)

And we have only one employment, we have only one path. And now... part-time employment is not enough, if any... (PL\_F1\_M\_3)

Intercultural assistants highlighted the need to make the system more coherent for the benefit of children, and migrant children in particular, and to recognise them as educational rather than administrative staff, which is the nature of their work.

That's why there's a lack of this consistency, because every school writes a request for... they have foreign students, they write an application to the City Hall. I ask because in the law we have it written that such a student is entitled to the assistance of an assistant, twelve months from the date of arrival, or from the date of beginning of education. (PL\_F1\_M\_2\_F)

It is necessary to emphasise that - especially in the absence of other systemic measures - their role is crucial for the integration of migrant children in the school context and often for building bridges between migrant families and the school. Unfortunately, despite being highlighted, their role is still underestimated and their work inadequately remunerated and without certainty of continuation.

## 7. Schools during the pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland forced schools to suspend in-person teaching for one of the longest periods in Europe. The shift to remote teaching left pupils and teachers unprepared, struggling with a lack of the proper infrastructure and space for studying, technical barriers, digital illiteracy or insufficient support from parents or lack of supplementary teaching. These barriers revealed the structural problems of the Polish educational system and the inequalities produced by the system. The interviews with professionals contribute to obtaining a better understanding of the changes in schools during the pandemic and their impact on migrant children.



## Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff

Teachers from the large city as well as from schools located close to the Centre for Foreigners emphasized that the pandemic has been a difficult time for children on various levels – from participation in classes, technical problems or finally – emotional, social and health problems. As one of the teachers remarked: “One pupil said when the distant learning was announced “<<I lost my Polish teacher, I lost my school, I lost my class>>” (PL\_T6\_F). Yet, these changes do not affect all children evenly, with children from a migration background and younger children hit the most by remote teaching. As noted by teachers:

(...) most of children cannot function like that, (...) especially those small ones. (PL\_T6\_F)

(...) two children are being look after, but the youngest is not. (...) and it is reflected in his education, because he comes and he leaves. (PL\_T6\_F)

In the case of younger children, the remote teaching affected their learning process as they just started attending school and they need direct, face-to-face contact with their teacher. Without this contact, and without the proper support of parents, they face many difficulties with learning including some of the most fundamental e.g. how to read and write.

### Access barriers

One of the most frequently mentioned problem regarding remote teaching is the access barrier. The teachers often talk about problems with adequate equipment and its availability (especially in larger families) as well as the problem with access to Internet. These problems have a greater impact on migrant children and were even more pronounced in the case of refugee children. The latter were able to tackle the shortage of devices only thanks to support from school, teachers or organizations:

In the spring, when there was a break [because of COVID-19] I organized a collection of computer equipment for children in the centre. The [name of the organization] initiative contacted me in order to help. Migrant children were provided with great equipment, they got balls, bicycles, even a trip to Warsaw. Good people donated 30 computers. (PL\_T5\_M)

The school provided material support during the first wave of the pandemic –the teacher organized a charity event in order to provide children with computers. (PL\_T9\_F)

Teachers also reported that children lack sufficient computer skills which put them in a disadvantaged position. These negative processes are clearly encapsulated in the following opinion of a teacher from a school located close to the centre for foreigners:

On-line learning is a tragedy. We work on Librus (on-line platform). Children have not been trained to use Librus efficiently. Parents also could not help them. Children who live in the reception centre do not log in at all. In the spring, during the first wave of pandemic, it was a tragedy, around 80 percent of the foreign students did not participate in the lessons. They didn't have computers; they had some old phones. There was poor internet in the reception centre because it is located in the forest. So our Polish teacher got laptops for them. There was a nationwide charity campaign. But it did not help because the internet was still poor. Now it is a bit better, because we have already showed them how to use the platform but not all of them remember because it is a lot of information. (PL\_T9\_F)

### Invisible children

The teachers emphasize the problem of disappearing pupils: they did not show up during the online classes due to a lack of devices, but also because of their own digital illiteracy and that of their parents. Insufficient cultural and language parents' competencies intertwined with their lack of financial resources made the parents of refugee children unable to help them with online lessons and therefore increased the risk of



refugee and migrant children abandoning school. For pupils who participated in online teaching, showing their faces and surroundings was problematic. In the teachers' opinion, children who do not want to turn their cameras on may be camera-shy and being present online all the time may be stressful and cause discomfort for them.

Children do not show their face during online classes. They reply on chat or record their voice but do not want to show on up on the screen. Girls are usually more consistent. They send pictures of paintings they made. (PL\_T9\_F)

According to teachers, the participation of migrant and refugee children in remote teaching is also hindered by Polish-language attrition. Teachers and psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff emphasized that children's language skills deteriorated during the pandemic as they lost contact with the spoken language, passively participating in lessons. They also use their parents' language more often. Some teachers admitted that migrant and refugee children have regressed in Polish language competencies which definitely hindered their participation in classes. In such cases, they often explained that they cannot participate in the lessons due to broken cameras or microphones.

And then came the online lessons and the situation was reversed to her disadvantage, because during these online lessons she rarely participated, and if she did, she did not speak at all. Here again the language barrier came back. (PL\_T3\_F)

(...) the camera is always broken, so is the microphone, you know. So when I want to ask about something, just to be sure that they understand, that they are there. Sometimes I say "[name] say something". "Please answer how do you think it should be? What would we write here?" He doesn't say a word, just writes that his microphone is broken. (PL\_T13\_F)

I saw them using Russian more than when they went to school. (PL\_T6\_F)

To support migrant children who do not understand Polish well, the respondent from the Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre for Children organized a training course for children who arrived to Poland during pandemic to help them transition to the Polish school environment. While the focus of this training was on enhancing their knowledge of Polish, it was also a way of improving their educational achievements.

Some of these children had already had additional Polish language lessons remotely, some did not. All of them were strongly excluded from the environment, without language immersion, without meeting Polish children. They had linguistic online contact with their parents and family somewhere abroad, but their linguistic competence is significantly affected by not being in the school environment.

The difficulty in following classes is also linked to missing non-verbal communication. During online lessons, the interaction between pupils and teachers as well as between pupils is limited, there is no space for hand gestures, body language or expressing emotions. On the other hand, one of the teachers from a school close to the Centre for Foreigners noted that although the refugee children are not typically active during on-line lessons, and they do not want to turn on their cameras, they engaged more in conversations in class chat as the pandemic developed.

The pandemic also hindered the children's participation in extracurricular activities. Under the COVID-19 regulations, it was not possible to run after-school activities, clubs, or contests. As a result, children lost the opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills, to demonstrate their talents or to flourish:

And it also depresses her a lot, she showed us a couple of such scenes here that I was concerned, but it comes from the fact that she was frustrated with the situation. There was supposed to be a pre-pandemic foreign language song contest in March and she was preparing for that contest, but they sent us home. and there was a scene of stomping,



screaming, and we explained to her that it was all schools, but she couldn't understand it. she is very ambitious. (PL\_T7\_F)

### Insufficient parental support

While discussing the participation of migrant and refugee children in remote lessons, teachers highlighted their greater risk of dropping out of school as they might not have sufficient parental support. In this context, teachers complained about a lack of contact with parents on the one hand, but on the other – the parents' inability to provide tutoring due to their digital illiteracy, inability to speak Polish or lack of knowledge of the Polish educational system. The psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff pointed out that such problems are not so visible during traditional education, when the children receive the support of in day-care centres or associations. As part of the counselling centre activities, on-line language support was organized in response to these problems.

Parents don't necessarily know Polish. So maybe they, I would say it in an ugly way, they can't deal with it. A pupil of the 7th or 8th or even 6th grade can say to his/her parent 'this is like that' but parent doesn't know if this lesson was sent in link, or if it is online on Teams (...). This parent is kind of limited because he/she can't cope with it. (PL\_14\_F)

Parents cannot support children because they do know how the educational system works, or the language and also because of a lack of knowledge about how computers work. (PL\_T14\_F)

### Social isolation

Teachers highlighted that school closures, remote teaching, lack of extracurricular activities as well as the restrictions caused by the pandemic (lowering social contacts) have had a negative impact on emotional and social development among pupils. Teachers from the large city claimed that migrant children missed peer-socialization, which in their opinion is a great loss for them: "she does not have any chance to contact Polish children while being there" (PL\_T6\_F). And she continued:

She met with two girls, and it was very important for her. (...) Those two girls contacted her and I hope it was not a one-off thing, and that they will keep that contact with her. Because she needs that just as everybody needs, and teenagers in particular. (PL\_T6\_F)

Social isolation and social distancing on the one hand and a need for social contact to mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic was a recurring theme in the interviews with teachers. Limited contact increased the inequalities experienced by migrant and refugee children, putting them at greater risk of not only underperforming at school, but also of mental problems, stress and depression:

She got into some kind of numbness; she says: "Why should go back to school now? I can get some sleep now." I am terrified because it is a kind of apathy, that is affecting about 80% of kids. (PL\_T6\_F)

The situation is even worse in the case of children who joined the school during the pandemic. As a teacher from a school close to the Centre for Foreigners says:

We have new Belarusians. They appeared for the first time. Mom talked about the situation in Belarus, but so far there was no contact or meeting. We didn't even see them [Note: PSK the children arrived during the remote learning period]. (PL\_T13\_F)

### Increased teacher workloads

The COVID-19 pandemic not only affected pupils, but also teachers. They faced new educational challenges related to technology and online platforms they had to quickly become familiar with, adjusting the teaching



programme to online teaching and sustaining the sense of community among pupils. It took considerable effort from teachers to make online teaching possible and accessible for pupils: from performing tasks related to online instruction and additional support for pupils to preparing online educational resources and exploring various methods to ease the participation of children in lessons. Teachers talked about activities such as setting up additional groups on Teams where pupils could do various tasks or using alternative way of communication:

The teacher is very flexible. She believes that most efficient way is to work by Messenger. The teacher also sends them short movies during which they explain the topic and instruction for homework and YouTube movies. They receive homework via Messenger and upload their homework. (PL\_T9\_F)

Teachers deemed their work essential for migrant and refugee children. Through additional activities and consultations, teachers tried to keep the pupils engaged and motivated:

I refer them to meetings after class. Then they can talk to me. Now there are online lessons, there are scheduled consultations. There are also students now, as part of their practice they have children from Ukraine under their care. They have to arrange consultations etc.; they can reinforce these students. (PL\_T10\_F)

### Social workers

Social workers admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way they operate: no longer are they able to support individuals or families through regular supervision sessions at their homes or schools. The visits to service users have been replaced by office-based work and telephone contact. The lack of the opportunity to hold face-to-face meetings hindered their ability to work efficiently with the whole family, to observe the interactions between family members, and to observe them in various everyday situations.

Well, at the moment the situation is such that we don't go out into the field, so our work is completely different from this goal and our work. Because we don't go out to these families, sometimes it was even the case that everything is done over the phone, so I don't even see the person I'm talking to, I don't have the opportunity to get to know them, it's all done over the phone. We conduct the interview over the phone, all the documents are sent by email, sometimes we just sign the documents on the spot, because we have the opportunity to receive them on the spot, but we don't have the opportunity to go into the apartment and do the interview and observe various important things for us. This is completely different from the model of our work. (PL\_SW7\_F)

Social workers identified a number of specific problems they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the social workers (PL\_SW7\_F) talked about her work to provide support to a migrant family (with children) who were in quarantine while another social worker (PL\_SW6\_F) highlighted the problem of the integration of children from countries with male-dominated cultures during the pandemic. Lockdown made children – especially girls – more prone to patriarchal norms which feature in their parents' culture. As a result, they may drop out from school or become victims of violence.

Everything at the moment is hampered by the pandemic. Suddenly the nature of our work has changed. What can affect children is their development and their integration into home cultures, that is, if someone has come from Turkey, then because of religion, for example, parents may demand that women have more responsibilities. And my concern is that children may be abused in these homes, and for example girls will have more responsibilities and boys will not. Unless these people enter our culture and start living in it, which is something we cannot demand. (PL\_SW6\_F)



What seems to be important is cooperation between social workers and schools to minimize the consequences of pandemic and the experience of one social worker can be illustrative here. During a supervision session she discovered that one of the children (the youngest boy) had not been attending online lessons, which had not been noticed by his teachers. As a consequence, he was unable to follow classes and required special assistance to catch up with the material.

And as for the youngest boy, he was in the second grade of the primary school, we organised remote learning, because it turned out that the boy hadn't been going to school for three weeks and nobody knew what was going on with him. I called the school to ask if they knew they had such a student, and the teacher was surprised that he was there at all, she thought it was some kind of mistake. And so we quickly organised this remote learning. We organised some kind of a day-room for him, so that someone could help him with the homework, because his parents were not able to, so we also looked for a day-room that was still working, so that he could go there and have someone do the homework with him. (PL\_SW6\_F)

As social workers do not have direct contact with children and their families due to the pandemic, to get more guidance and to provide adequate support, they need to stay in touch with the school in order to be informed about a migrant child's situation and to monitor whether they have undergone any changes in their behaviour.

We contact schools, other institutions that cooperate, that may have such a problem in the situation of children. If we want to know something, we have some concern, the school helps a lot. The teacher can talk to the child and observe the child even while they are having a remote lesson. We don't have that opportunity. (PL\_SW6\_F)

### Intercultural assistants

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored and amplified the existing problems experienced in the education system by intercultural assistants. During lockdown they performed their work mostly online. They were required to perform the same tasks as before the pandemic: they assisted children in online classes, helped them prepare for the lessons or monitored their progress. They also addressed parents' concerns regarding remote teaching and advised them how best to support their children during this challenging time. Yet, the scope and modes of their work, as well as the intensity of the contacts with children and their families, have all increased, leading to them overworking and a blurring of the boundaries between personal and private lives. The intercultural assistants noted that the pandemic exposed the deficiencies of the education system regarding the integration of migrant children. They highlighted problems such as the invisibility of migrant children on learning platforms, their low active participation in remote classes but also a lack of competences on the part of parents in navigating educational institutions.

The pandemic also revealed the fragile and precarious working conditions endured by cultural assistants. They indicated a lack of stability in their employment which became even more uncertain during the pandemic: they talked about their short-term contracts, part-time jobs, the need to have parallel jobs in several schools. Due to such working condition, they are unable to get to know the children better and to provide them with a sense of security and stability, which has further negative consequences for their integration and educational development.

## 8. Recommendations

### Teachers and public psychological and pedagogical counselling centre staff

From the heterogeneous picture which emerges from our research, two types of recommendations are clear: on the one hand, there are general meta-recommendations, highlighting the need to build and/or continue a new 'philosophy' of work and methods with children at school; on the other hand, teachers provide very concrete and detailed suggestions based on their own work experience which could help improve the current functioning of schools. Both the meta and specific recommendations will be discussed below.

#### Meta-recommendations

An important element arising from the interviews with teachers was the need to build a school environment based on the principles of openness, mutual trust, and an acceptance of diversity. The school in the teachers' opinions must guarantee a sense of security and agency for children with and without a migrant background, which can only be achieved by building and maintaining relationships based on dialogue. The conviction of the need to develop an open 'philosophy' of working at school was more often expressed in schools hosting mainly refugee children, those located near the centres for foreigners (usually in smaller cities or villages).

So I can see that it's been years of working on trust, openness, mutual kindness, on not excluding each other, on being open to each other, that this is the most important thing for these people. (PL\_T1\_F)

In the narratives of the teachers, refugee children were often portrayed as being in particularly vulnerable positions, with different cultural experiences and varying degrees of socialisation (including religious socialisation).

I noticed that these children need a lot of care, care from adults, they need a lot of strengthening of their sense of worth, that they are loved, that they are not rejected because of their nationality, faith. (PL\_T1\_F)

Such a perception of pupils led them to think about the school as a place where tolerance and cooperation must be emphasised. Recommendations emerging from schools located close to centres for foreigners where refugee families live included guidance not only relating to the functioning of children at school but going beyond the school environment to include the families of refugee children and the local community. This group of teachers stressed the need to organise meetings for whole families, so that not only pupils but also their relatives feel included in the life of the local community and the school. In this approach, the school should also provide opportunities for them to express themselves, their emotions, cultural traditions and identity.

There has been a very positive response to these programmes of trips and excursions organised for whole families. It seems to me that where these programmes included excursions, these problems were probably the most responsive to the needs of refugees, to the needs of whole families. (PL\_T1\_F)

Furthermore, teachers emphasised that in order to really empower students and enable them to achieve their goals, it is also necessary to take action directed at parents/guardians, providing them with the opportunity to integrate all family members.

It would be something valuable if those parents could learn about the reality [ in Poland] from the very beginning, that it's not worth counting on social benefits, that this is not Germany, so that they could see where they can earn money, where to look for a job. For



example, in Poland we have such a profession as a packer, or a plumber, and you'll have 4,000 a month. If such an introductory education for parents [was introduced] from the beginning. I don't want to say that these parents are scheming because they have allowances. They are very resourceful, many of them work, some of them even work on the edge of regulations to have more money. (PL\_T5\_M)

The creation of a special working-group of staff dedicated to refugee/migrant children in schools and constantly developing their competences in this area was also seen as good practice. An important role was assigned to the school psychologist, who should be able to respond to the needs of all pupils.

We have 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)

Similar voices only resonated to some extent in relation to schools in the large city. Teachers tended to emphasise the 'cultural similarity' of migrant children and to a lesser extent stressed the need to look for a new philosophy of working with pupils. In this case, it was also considered good practice to organise meetings in schools in which different pupils could talk about, for example, Christmas customs practised by them (this clearly shows the importance and presence of religion and religiosity in Polish schools - as most examples of such practices referred to traditions of religious holidays).

Or groups... here the Poles present how we do Easter, we hear them, and then we hear other groups, from the Chinese for example. And then you could come up and talk. Or maybe even dress up in a costume... like we have in [name of a city]. (PL\_T2\_F)

There was always something going on in our school. There were various projects or activities which were implemented in our school. It was done exactly to get to know each other, to make cohabitation in school or generally in life easier. (PL\_T4\_F)

Thus, meta-recommendations concern concrete solutions at school to a lesser extent but rather the general atmosphere at school. Teachers drew attention to the need for openness and a friendly atmosphere at school. However, it also transpires that they use stereotypical and ethnocentric thinking about cultural differences, only noticing and putting emphasis on, for example, the religious or culinary dimension of a given culture. On this basis, we can conclude that it is necessary to promote methods of working with children that go beyond stereotypical thinking, but also take into account the agency of pupils, while offering support to those who need it.

### Detailed recommendations

Apart from the general meta-recommendations, the interviews with teachers also provide us with very detailed indications of solutions which can be implemented according to the following categories. Some of these recommendations referred to the need for changes at the level of the education system, while others focused on the competences and skills of teachers.

### *Systemic change in schools*

Recommendations for systemic changes in schools primarily revealed the clear deficiencies in educational and migration policy. The teachers highlighted the lack of clear regulations and adequate solutions that could be implemented in schools. The most frequently recommended tool was the position of an intercultural assistant at school. Although there is legal scope to employ such a person in schools, many of them, together with the bodies financing this solution (usually local governments), are unaware of it or lack funds for implementation. The headmasters and teachers most often learned about the possibility of



employing such a person “by word of mouth”, which shows that information about this tool is still far from the norm. The lack of knowledge about the opportunity to provide support by employing assistants is also revealed by the fact that some of our interviewees were unsure as to whether such assistants were needed in their school or whether they had ever been employed.

I support this position [of intercultural assistant] and advised my colleagues to hire one. And in fact more and more schools employ such assistants. People do not even know about it, because even in the educational law there is no such thing as an intercultural assistant. There is an assistant for Asperger's, for children with disabilities, but there is no assistant for children who come from different countries. (PL\_T7\_F)

The hiring of intercultural assistants by local governments, a role that was not only highly valued by teachers but also by pupils and parents, was difficult due to the specific form of employment (it is an administrative post, based on the Labour Code and not the Teacher's Charter – in Polish: Karta Nauczyciela), low salaries and short contracts (only for the duration of the school year, with no possibility of employment during summer holidays). When intercultural assistants were employed by NGOs in the framework of European multicultural projects, they also had short time contracts and a lack of job stability. Such precarious and insecure employment conditions not only made the work of the assistants unattractive, but also indirectly contributed to the reinforcement of inequalities in the labour market affecting migrant communities (as most assistants have a migrant background).

What is closest to my work at the moment is that I would like every school with foreign children to have an additional tutor, someone who mediates in contacts with teachers, headmasters, someone who coordinates the education of these children, who mediates in contacts with parents or the school, in other words an intercultural assistant. (PL\_T1\_F)

It is not common knowledge, even the inspector [from the curatorial office] did not know what a cultural assistant is. I, for example, would like to have someone like that on a full-time basis, 40 hours. It is strange, because this cultural assistant is employed as an administrative worker, she is not a teacher. This is a part-time employee who earns 1500 PLN. This might be an ad hoc, additional job, not the main one. (PL\_T7\_F)

I had problems with the recruitment of a cultural assistant, because first I looked for a teacher, psychologist or educator and then I sent her to this training, I just referred Ms. J., she is a psychologist, she agreed to do this course. She's with us for the second year, I thought we were going to lose her because it's part time. (PL\_T7\_F)

It was therefore recommended that the employment of assistants be regulated and stabilised, that they be formally integrated into the teaching staff and that the state budget for these activities be increased.

Another important recommendation was the introduction of preparatory classes, which would serve newcomer pupils in a slower, but necessary entry into the school environment.<sup>4</sup> Teachers pointed out that not all children who are forced to attend lessons straight away do well in this situation. This remark mainly concerned older children (ISCED-2) and children who came to Poland during the pandemic, for whom both acclimatisation to Polish school and the acquisition of Polish language skills were significantly hampered. However, preparatory classes were less frequently recommended by teachers working with children from countries that are culturally and linguistically close to Poland (e.g. from Ukraine), which indicates the need

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that since 2017 there is a legal opportunity to create preparatory (welcome) classes in schools at the request of the school management. However, due to the unique nature of migration to Poland, which translates into the number of foreign students in schools, as well as structural and financial barriers, this solution has not been widely implemented.



for nuanced and flexible solutions. What is important, the postulate of preparatory classes was rejected by some students, who emphasised during the interviews that it would be a 'lost year' for them and that they would prefer to start learning and building relations with peers right away. Attention was also drawn to the need to increase the hours of Polish as a foreign language.

We often talk about it, that it should be organised in such a way that when a child comes to Poland they should not go to school but learn Polish for the first year. (PL\_T12\_F)

I don't know if throwing these kids into school is a good idea without language preparation. I am in favour of a one-year Polish language course, but maybe it is a professional preference, because I teach Polish for foreigners, so it seems to me that it would be helpful for them.... assuming that everyone will handle without it is wrong. Maybe children form the first grade but I would not throw a child into the second grade. (PL\_T15\_F)

The final exams at the end of 8th grade were also considered to be a significant problem. This difficulty was particularly related to students who arrived in Poland shortly before 8th grade and for whom mastering Polish in such a short time was impossible. Significantly, the examination sheets are currently only available in Polish and the sole provisions available are the use of a dictionary and extended examination time. In the opinion of the teachers, given the requirements of the curriculum, these adaptations are far too limited. The final exams should be adapted more to the needs of students: the worksheets should be available in their mother tongue and schools should ensure the presence of an intercultural assistant at the exam.

Another systemic recommendation was the need to prepare textbooks adapted to the needs of migrant children. The need referred primarily to subject-specific textbooks for pupils in older grades (ISCED-2). Teachers also stressed the desirability of preparing worksheets adapted to the needs of migrant pupils.

Maybe access to some textbooks, printables, a whole machine would have to start up that would linguistically secure each subject. Words in every department. If there are already many of these migrants all over Poland, also in terms of education, there is a staff of people, it would be so much easier to prepare such availability of textbooks for teachers. (PL\_T11\_F)

We also have such classes, so called Polish for foreigners, which are additional Polish language classes, currently run by a teacher of Polish. Such classes are very much needed. (PL\_T3\_F)

Teachers also emphasised that in schools located near centres for foreigners, non-standard solutions should be allowed, which could build up the migrant pupils' self-esteem. One such solution, for which one school did not receive permission from the decision-making body, would be the option to learn Russian as a second foreign language. This would allow pupils with some knowledge of Russian to develop their language competence, but also help them to see themselves as competent in speaking a language at school.

#### *The competence of the teaching staff*

It was also recommended that teachers should improve their competences continuously. The interviewees pointed to various workshops where soft competences can be developed and experiences exchanged with other persons working at the school, as well as training courses improving skills in specific areas, e.g. teaching foreigners Polish as a second language. The interviews showed that such workshops, most often organised by non-governmental organisations, primarily serve as a forum for the exchange of experiences and grassroots best practices, helping them to establish contacts and learn from each other.

That would be very helpful, that kind of equipping you with basic tools that are already very helpful at the start. You can support yourself and shorten the adaptation period.



Because it is very time consuming, searching. Of course, every child is different, and everything has to be adapted. (PL\_T3\_F)

I was at a training course in [name of a city]. It was a course or workshop at our facility. This training in [name of a city] 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)

It was also indicated that part of raising competences should be the constant supervision of their work, access to psychological support for teachers working with children who have gone through trauma or have developmental disorders and activities counteracting professional burnout. Such solutions are almost entirely unavailable in Polish schools; if teachers decide to ask for help, they usually do so on their own and at their own expense.

### Recommendations from teaching during a pandemic

The functioning of schools during the pandemic was also the subject of the interviews. As lessons took place remotely for several months, most of the recommendations from the pandemic period referred specifically to online learning. Teachers emphasised that the pandemic revealed significant social inequalities, manifested in access to a good Internet connection, computer equipment, and suitable space at home for quiet study. This problem was particularly pronounced in the case of students living in centres for foreigners, where collections for the purchase of computer equipment were organised through NGOs. Importantly, the role and tasks of intercultural assistants during distance learning were not entirely clear for many teachers. In this case, it was recommended that guidelines be developed for online lessons, indicating how assistants should be involved.

### Social workers

During the interviews, social workers highlighted several key areas where they felt changes were necessary. The vast majority of these recommendations relate to the challenges related to the social work profession. The first area is that of the competencies of social workers themselves. A number of training sessions and workshops providing opportunities to acquire new skills in legal regulations, soft skills (e.g. in intercultural and interpersonal communication) and working with clients from different cultural backgrounds were considered a good practice here.

There were such trainings. Ms [name] runs a nice series of trainings in this field. I try to have regular contact. I had an opportunity to participate in one such a three-day cycle of trainings on communication, which focused mainly on the problem of communication barriers. The Hofstede diagram was analysed. It was a very workshop-like cycle, there were many exercises. It made me aware of many things, especially communication mistakes. If you already know which nationality group you're going to, you try to find out something so that you don't make a mistake right from the start. At work, we are often asked to pay attention to our clothes and appearance so as not to offend or shock. (PL\_SW2\_F)

However, it was pointed out that the trainings often repeat the same content and rarely directly address the needs of social workers. These workshops were not available to all of our interviewees - sometimes social workers sought them out on their own and organised their own participation (without the support of their employers). Therefore, the training sessions offered should not only be better tailored to the needs of this group of professionals, but also organised in a systematic and well-structured way. Employers, usually local governments, should increase access to such trainings for social workers.



I have the impression that the training is always the same, with the same information, but this is not particularly analysed. I often get the impression that the same things are said, often even the legal basis is not updated. So, as far as I'm concerned, it's a question of improving competence, but not only through my own means, but also internally. And I do not know whether the solution from years ago, where specific units were separated for foreigners, was not a better one. It is obvious that it was impossible to organise everything there, because such mixed families were normally reported from the region. However, this legislation and the implementation of the integration programme require much more commitment than an ordinary procedure. Working within the framework of such a basic scheme of work is completely different; we know what help we can give and what not in a given case. And when someone completely new comes along, functioning on different principles. And if you are not prepared for this, you lose credibility. (PL\_SW2\_F)

The next recommendations referred to the issue of language. Respondents pointed out that social workers have an insufficient command of foreign languages, which makes it difficult for them to communicate with clients who do not speak Polish. It was recommended that this group of professionals be given the opportunity to improve their competences in this field. Another solution pointed out was the systemic use of translators during the provision of services –to date, in the vast majority of cases, translation has been organised through acquaintances and informal networks (e.g. with the local university), but it has not always been possible to provide such translation. The issue of the language barrier also arose in relation to various forms and paperwork, only available to clients in Polish.

I think that kind of procedure how to proceed. Such support related to the language barrier, assistance in contact. These people have difficulties in understanding all these procedures, completing, filling in documents. These forms are only in Polish. (PL\_SW7\_F)

In my opinion, first of all some language programs would be useful. It seems to me that this is the main problem. It is the language barrier. (PL\_SW2\_F)

Training issue on cultural differences, language skills issue. Interpreters in social work centres. Or a situation that there would be employees who would specialise in working with migrant families. (PL\_SW6\_F)

As the above quote indicates, the interviewees also highlighted the need for systemic changes. Some of them advocated a solution that existed in the past - the creation of special departments/cells responsible for clients with a migrant background. Such a solution would ensure that social workers who work there are equipped with the necessary language and legal competences, thus potentially increasing the quality of services provided.

Another recommendation concerned the improvement of information flow between institutions. According to the respondents, the protection of personal data, although obviously needed, significantly hinders communication about clients with other institutions involved and thus reduces the quality of services offered.

I would expect one channel of communication. I would expect a single channel of communication, whether by telephone or e-mail, so that one channel would be established, and not that we would have to find out about certain things by means of a stamped letter or, at other times, by e-mail. This is an issue of document circulation, and I understand that it is an issue of protected data. It seems to me that if we act for the benefit of a single person or family, this should be systematised in some way, that one e-mail, one phone call or some other type of information transfer is enough to enable us to establish certain things very smoothly and quickly, and here, depending on which institution we come across, there are



completely different rules for working and obtaining information. This makes work very difficult. (PL\_SW1\_F)

Social workers employed in centres for foreigners above all emphasised the need to involve volunteers in work with children. Thanks to their involvement, refugee children are much more open to cooperation and find themselves in relationships with others.

This is why the children are very keen to work with volunteers. Because it is an outsider who comes and has time for them and only them. And these kids can talk to such a person. Upon closer acquaintance, they can talk about their problems. And they feel taken seriously, as full-fledged people who can talk about what hurts and what makes them happy. (PL\_SW18\_F)

It is worth noting that due to the tasks assigned to social workers by law, they primarily work with families - children only become clients indirectly in this case. This also affects the nature of the recommendations made by the workers who, when discussing good practices and suggesting solutions, focused mainly on their own competences and opportunities for action.

### Intercultural assistants

Intercultural assistants working in schools, similarly to teachers, stressed the need to introduce systematic education on cultural diversity in schools. Activities sensitising pupils to cultural diversity should be included in the curriculum and implemented horizontally, not only on special occasions.

M2: They [schoolchildren] get to know the culture a bit, have some... I think that then such relation is established faster.

F3: That integration... will happen.

M2: Because they don't see it as a difference, they just get to know it, know it better, learn more about such child, right? And then, perhaps, it helps them a little. (PL\_F1\_M)

In addition to recommendations referring to the need for intercultural education, the assistants echoed the teachers in the need for improved conditions of employment, salaries, and contract stability. They pointed out not only the insecurity of their jobs, but also the refusal to create the position of intercultural assistant in some schools, despite clear reasons to employ a person to support migrant children.

F2: I don't know... Or maybe schools write that, and each of them has different conditions, each gets a different contract... I've been employed for exactly one year - from the fifteenth September till the fifteenth September.

F4: Oh, you see!

F2: Here - a completely different situation - full time, half time, I know a school that wrote a request and did not get it.

F2: Despite that there are fifty-two foreigners.

MOD2: Oh, you see!

F4: Oh God...

F2: They haven't got an assistant this year.

F3: There's no common ground. Me, I... have some common approach like... I think that it is a problem for school principals. I don't know. (PL\_F1\_M)



At an organisational level, assistants also recommended a more streamlined integration of their group into the life of the school, including ways of communication and administrative management of work. This would significantly facilitate their work.

Key recommendations at a glance

- Introducing horizontal education on cultural diversity in schools;
- Including intercultural assistants in the communication and work management tools in the school;
- Ensure psychological support for students and teachers;
- Increased hours of Polish as a foreign language for migrant pupils;
- Developing worksheets for teaching migrant children;
- Adapting final exams (grade 8) to the needs of migrant pupils;
- Financially supporting the development of textbooks for subject lessons, taking into account the needs of children with poor Polish language skills;
- Accessible and structured training and coaching for teachers and social workers allowing for continuous competence development;
- Ensuring good employment conditions for intercultural assistants;
- Creating a forum for bestpractice and the exchange of experiences between different groups of professionals;
- Disseminating information about bestpractices and solutions available in schools;
- Creating programmes involving families, parents, and careers in school and community life.

## 9. Conclusions

The picture of professional experiences with migrant children at schools, resulting from and discussed in the previous sections of this report, reveals that the solutions implemented in schools are fundamentally different: some schools have extensive experience in working with migrant pupils, know and implement various programmes to support the learning of foreigners, while others have limited knowledge and access to innovative working methods. The school response to migrant children depends on both systemic and individual factors. While the former are related to the insufficient measures provided by the national policy framework, the former are connected to the qualifications of the professionals working with migrant children, as well as their approach towards them and the school environment.

The interviews with professionals highlight the lack of systemic and fully implemented solutions for working with migrant children. Based on the opinions of the teachers and intercultural assistants, we claim that existing programmes are often characterised as implemented through the individual efforts of teachers, headmasters and pedagogues who, in the absence of clear guidelines and recommendations, introduce bottom-up solutions, ‘experimenting’ as it were with the available tools. Similar opinions are voiced by social workers who also emphasised a lack of policies and measures directed to migrant families, and migrant children in particular. Although social workers believed that supporting migrant families is a part of their duties, they noted that they mostly support families in their work which are already in problematic situations and require their assistance and/or intervention. There are no programmes and measures aimed at the integration of migrants in a broader sense which would facilitate, among others, access to education for migrant children. Therefore, drawing on the professionals’ experience, a need for developing policies



that facilitate access to education for children by offering specific and concrete measures but also financial resources to implement these solutions is clearly discernible. In this context, the importance of intercultural assistant is pronounced since, according to teachers and intercultural assistants alike, such professionals contribute to the successful integration of children into school in terms of their educational progress but also well-being, self-esteem and overall functioning in social spheres. Although this measure is supported in the Polish educational system, the use of intercultural assistants is limited due to the insufficient promotion of this measure and secondly the instability of employment felt by intercultural assistants (the leading authority, i.e. the municipality, must give its approval and in less wealthy municipalities, it is difficult to obtain such additional resources) and the ambiguity of their status - they are employed in an administrative position, not as teachers. The integration of migrant children into school is also facilitated by teaching practices based on an inclusive approach. Teachers and intercultural assistants have already implemented methodologies which address the diversity of cultures and languages without isolating them as “migrant children”. Yet, these good practices are still rare in the education system and are a result of the efforts of individual professionals rather than a part of the curriculum and teaching guidelines provided in the educational policies.

The challenges which were broadly discussed by professionals also mention the language barrier and cultural differences. These factors were identified as barriers hindering academic progress and integration with peers and local communities. However, their impact is determined by the country of origin of a migrant child: while it plays pivotal role in case of migrants from culture seen as distant, it has a minor role for children from neighbouring countries and whose mother tongue belongs to the same language family. The professionals stress that overcoming these barriers requires a collaborative approach: in addition to working with the child, the involvement of peers and parents is felt to be significant.

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the structural problems affecting migrant children. All of the interviewed professionals talked about difficulties experienced by children in accessing online classes due to technical problems (e.g. lack of equipment, problems with access to the Internet), language barriers, the digital illiteracy of both children and their parents, and a lack of parental support. The pandemic also made migrant children feel disconnected from their peers and had an impact on their well-being and mental health. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic also intensified contact with children – especially by intercultural assistants as well as between different professionals supporting the integration of migrant children.

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## CHILD-UP WP5 local report - children's perspectives: Poland

### 1. Methodology

In this report we present the results of WP5 of the CHILD-UP project. It encompasses the qualitative data gathered during interviews (both individual and FGI) with children. We discuss how children talk about their educational environment and how they imagine their ideal school, with particular attention paid to the emotional and relational dimensions, children's educational aspirations, intercultural relations and the impact of COVID-19.

Four locations were chosen to gather the data for WP5 and these were mostly the continuation of cooperation established in WP4. We conducted fieldwork in a large city (1 million inhabitants), with the majority of subjects being economic migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In this case, migrant children compose a minority, constituting 2% of students in primary schools. We also conducted interviews in a medium-size city (around 30,000 inhabitants) and also with economic migrants. The other two locations are small towns in the eastern part of Poland, located near centres for foreigners which house refugee families. Refugee children constitute a majority of pupils in one of these two towns and a significant number in schools in the other. These refugee children are mainly from Chechnya and neighbouring post-Soviet republics. These three distinct field sites allowed us to investigate various communities within which migrant children live and the way in which those engaged in direct work with such children respond to this challenge.

The research with children took place in two time periods as a result of the second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland. In October 2020, contacts with schools were established: in part, these were schools we had worked with on the quantitative research, but we also made new ones. We planned research in a large city (Małopolska) and in schools close to a centre for foreigners (south-eastern Poland). We were able to carry out four focus groups with children from the schools close to the centre, but from the end of October the schools were closed and all classes, except for the youngest pupils, had switched to distance learning. The course of study for the 2020/2021 school year was as follows:

- September 1, 2020 - all students started full-time education;
- from October 24, 2020 to May 16, 2021, primary schools (4-8 ISCED2) switched to remote learning;
- from November 9, 2020, to January 17, 2021 grades 1-3 (ISCED1) of primary schools switched to remote learning;
- from 18 January 2021 to 28 February 2021 - grades 1-3 (ISCED1) of primary schools switched to full-time education;
- from March 1, 2021, the forms of education in grades 1-3 (ISCED1) of primary school in regions varied depending on the intensity of Covid-19;
- from May 3, 2021, grades 1-3 of (ISCED1) primary schools throughout the country returned to full-time education;
- from May 17, 2021 to May 30, 2021, grades 4-8 (ISCED2) of primary school and secondary school students - learning in a hybrid mode;
- from May 31, 2021, students returned to regular classroom education.

Due to the unique nature of conducting research with children, we decided to postpone this part of the project while we carried out online interviews with professionals. As the lockdown and remote learning dragged on, we decided to undertake the research despite the schools being closed and thus obtained permission from the Project Leader to change from group to individual interviews. Some of the interviews

were conducted online, but with a camera so that researchers and respondents could have eye contact. Once the schools were open, we returned to the research in schools and a significant proportion of the individual interviews and two further group interviews were carried out face-to-face. In summary, the conditions for conducting the research were extremely difficult. We did not have the chance for extended stays at the school, meetings with parents or the selection of classes/groups. With the end of the school year approaching, and with some schools either not wishing to continue cooperation or fearing a breach of the sanitary regime, we also benefited from our contacts with cultural assistants and employees of psychological-pedagogical counselling centres, who cooperated with us and helped us to get access to migrant children.

The research was carried out in two schools in the Lublin voivodship and 5 schools in Lesser Poland voivodship. Six FGIs and 27 IDIs were carried out in October 2020 and May-June 2021. All but three of the IDIs were conducted face-to-face, as well as all FGIs were carried out face-to-face. Among the migrant students participating in the FGIs, there were students from ISCED levels 1 and 2, 14 girls and 10 boys. The refugee children were mainly from Chechnya but also from Tajikistan, and Turkey (Kurdistan). Of the pupils participating in the IDIs, seven were from ISCED 1 and 20 were from ISCED 2. 13 girls and 14 boys participated and they were mainly from Ukraine and Belarus. Detailed information about the interviewees together with their main social characteristics is presented in Table 1. During some of the interviews with children, their parents, siblings and cultural assistants were present. This says a lot about the specifics of fieldwork. The presence of intercultural assistants was due to organisational arrangements. Some of the interviews took place in schools and the presence of an assistant was a formal requirement to ensure the safety of the child. Intercultural assistants also engaged in translation, since not all the children knew Polish well enough to take part in the interview on their own. The presence of family members was mainly related to the organisational aspect - parents brought their children to the interviews. Their knowledge of Polish was sometimes poorer than their children's, so the translation aspect rarely played any role.

*Table 1: Research with migrant children*

| FGI | Date         | Area          | ISCED | Number of FGI participants | Number and gender of migrant children | Country of origin | Place of residence |
|-----|--------------|---------------|-------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1   | October 2020 | Lubelskie     | 1 i 2 | 5                          | 1 boy and 4 girls                     | Chechnya          | rural area         |
| 2   | October 202t | Lubelskie     | 1 i 2 | 5                          | 1 boy and 4 girls                     | Chechnya          | small town         |
| 3   | October 2020 | Lubelskie     | 1 i 2 | 5                          | 5 boys                                | Chechnya          | small town         |
| 4   | October 2020 | Lubelskie     | 1 i 2 | 5                          | 5 girls                               | Chechnya          | small town         |
| 5   | June 2021    | Lesser Poland | 2     | 10                         | 1 boy, 1 girl                         |                   | city               |
| 6   | June 2021    | Lesser Poland | 2     | 10                         | 2 boys                                |                   | city               |



| IDI | Date          | Area          | ISCED |  | Gender | Country of origin | Place of residence |
|-----|---------------|---------------|-------|--|--------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Belarus           | city               |
| 2   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | boy    | Belarus           | city               |
| 3   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | boy    | Ukraine           | city               |
| 4   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Ukraine           | city               |
| 5   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Belarus           | city               |
| 6   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Ukraine           | city               |
| 7   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | boy    | Ukraine           | city               |
| 8   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1     |  | boy    | Ukraine           | city               |
| 9   | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Belarus           | city               |
| 10  | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | girl   | Ukraine           | city               |
| 11  | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2     |  | boy    | Ukraine           | city               |
| 12  | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1     |  | girl   | Ukraine           | city               |



|    |               |               |   |  |      |            |            |
|----|---------------|---------------|---|--|------|------------|------------|
| 13 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 14 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1 |  | girl | Ukraine    | city       |
| 15 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 16 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 17 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 18 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1 |  | girl | Belarus    | city       |
| 19 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | girl | Belarus    | city       |
| 20 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 21 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 1 |  | boy  | Ukraine    | city       |
| 22 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | girl | Nigeria    | city       |
| 23 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | girl | Belarus    | city       |
| 24 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy  | Tajikistan | city       |
| 25 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | girl | Chechnya   | small town |



|    |               |               |   |  |     |            |            |
|----|---------------|---------------|---|--|-----|------------|------------|
| 26 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy | Turkey     | small town |
| 27 | May-June 2021 | Lesser Poland | 2 |  | boy | Tajikistan | small town |

Among the methodological reflections, the researchers highlighted to following:

- The length of the questionnaire - it was very long, in the case of the FGI, when the researchers had time limited by the duration of the lesson, it was difficult to see all the issues in depth. In the case of IDIs, children's fatigue was an issue, especially in the case of online interviews;
- The benefits of using visual aids - the researchers used Dixit cards to support conversations about the ideal school and the needs of pupils;
- Children’s eagerness to talk, they seemed to have a need to talk about their problems and share their experience. However, due to time limit, it was impossible to deepen all the issues they addressed;
- Children experiencing difficulties in adaptation at schools were reluctant to share their stories and only with the help of cultural assistant we managed to get to know them;
- For some children, especially refugee children, a problem was an insufficient knowledge of the language, they had problems understanding some of the questions and expressing themselves. Younger children, on the other hand, found the questionnaire too difficult in places;
- Parents and intercultural assistants who were present during the interview sometimes actively participated in the conversation by encouraging the children to tell their stories or giving them prompts so that they could provide more detailed recall.

## 2. The school as a lived space

In this section, we focus on the perception of the school in two dimensions. Firstly, we show how migrant children perceive Polish schools (also often in relation to their schools in their country of origin), but also what an ideal school would look like, from the infrastructure through the learning process to the school as a social environment and a place for intensive relations.

### Real school

Between countries and school systems – a comparison of schools in the country of origin and Poland

For some children, the discussion on school brought them back to their counties of origin as they began comparing the schools which they had attended before moving to Poland with their current schools. They talked about the nicer design of the classrooms than in their country of origin or a better approach on the part of the teachers and lessons that activate pupils:

Well, here at school it's a bit different than in Ukraine, because in Ukraine there were only white walls and no such drawings including the subject of the class. Each teacher had a class somewhere, for example if it was chemistry, the chemistry teacher in that class. Now we walk around the classrooms, and in Ukraine we sat in one and the ladies came to us. Well, maybe we went there a little bit for English, for chemistry, but not always. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)



There were still a lot of experiments in lessons, for example in chemistry, physics, and in Ukraine we didn't have that. Well, I remember two experiments somewhere, but that's not it either. Because we had this experiment, there was a metal and a magnet, and there was some kind of experiment. Well, we know that metal attracts to a magnet. Then there was another experience with mixtures, we had to separate the mixture from the metal with a magnet and something else, I don't remember. Well, these were obvious. And here there were many such experiments, I don't even remember all of them. (...) And chemistry a little like to learn it, formulas, elements, it is not so difficult anymore. And the teacher tells everything in an understandable way. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

Another pupil pointed out the corrupting elements of the school in Ukraine (bribes for honours for a pupil) and appreciated that praise and grades in the Polish school only depend on her:

CH: There was more I wanted [to add] to it because when you go to school, there was a board with pictures of pupils. This board and every year who had the best grades there. I really wanted to get on that board, well everyone in the class probably wanted to.

I: Dreamed about it.

CH And I wanted it too, but you had to get a total of 10, 11, 12 in each subject, a nine wasn't good enough.

CH: But it was even more difficult, because here, if a child knows it, he [gets an award], and if a child in Ukraine knows it, they don't give it to him, unless parents bring something for the teacher. And that's why the child couldn't get the mark, because the parents were supposed to come to the teacher, bring something in a bag, or flowers, or a small envelope. And then the child would already receive such a distinction from the teacher. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

One child pointed out that in Belarus a teacher made sure that pupils knew their assignments. As the child explained, the teacher wrote the assignment on the board and the children also had special homework diaries. Now the boy is attending a higher grade class and the responsibility for remembering the tasks has shifted to the pupils, but his remark may indirectly express a longing for more care or concern for his well-being.

CH: There, children at school have a kind of diary where they write down all...

I: Homework.

CH: ...homework that the children need to do. There is no such thing here.

I: Here you can, but you don't have to.

CH: And it's Leo who has such a problem with it.

I: So I take it it was better for you to have it all written down, right?

CH: Yeah. I didn't remember the assignment. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

### Positive and negative aspects of Polish schools

When we asked migrant children about the good and bad aspects of Polish schools, the most important issue was the attitude of teachers and school staff towards children. Pupils greatly appreciated teachers who tried to ensure that children are fully informed about the requirements for their assignments and the time available for their preparation. To sum up, a key element for a positive perception of the school are teachers. If they conduct interesting lessons, offer help when a pupil does not understand something, and at the same time have an understanding of various difficult emotions (e.g. a pupil was ashamed to answer in front of the board, standing in front of the whole class), the whole school image was positive:

I: And which such teacher is the coolest? In which subject?



CH: Well, definitely the lady who teaches biology and chemistry, because I think she's the best at talking to children and she's just very understanding.

I: And the Polish teacher?

CH: Well, the Polish teacher is my form teacher, she's ok, but sometimes such situations happen, it's not very nice, but it's ok. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

Some of the children show a very enthusiastic attitude towards school, perhaps in comparison to the situation before their arrival or a general satisfaction with life in Poland, but also perhaps trying to guess the researcher's intentions (the interviews were conducted in a school context, usually at school).

I: What do you like best about your lessons?

CH: Everything, everything pleases me. When we learn, when we talk, when we watch videos about the readings. (PL\_I16\_CH\_B)

I: What is uncool, difficult about this school?

CH: Everything is good here. Only thing that's bad is that they smoke here and they're not all vegans. (PL\_I13\_CH\_B)

On the other hand, among the negative aspects - apart from indicating disliked school subjects –there was disorder in the classroom or being snubbed by other pupils:

CH: In class I don't like someone getting in the way or someone running around the class or the lady saying leave it and they do it all the time. That's what I don't like. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

Pupils also take badly to oppressive behaviour by teachers, enforcing discipline by shouting instead of explanation:

CH: I don't like it when the teacher(s) shouts and the subject is difficult or incomprehensible, like physics. (PL\_F1\_CH)

CH: I don't like it when someone shouts in class (...). (PL\_F1\_CH)

CH: Well, I used to, for example, when I was in 5th grade, there was this bad lady there, for example I had a card and so on, I said that I forgot how to translate words, and she didn't say and shouted. So for example she was in class she repeated one time, then I said to her can you repeat the word, she shouted at me and said she repeated several times and there was really only one.

I: Was that just in relation to you or...?

CH: No, no, to everyone. (PL\_I11\_CH\_B)

Additionally, one pupil indicated that the teacher disregarded the fact that she may not yet understand handwritten Polish words:

I: I don't like chemistry and physics, we have one lady and she is always shouting, she writes a lot on the board a lot and with her the writing is incomprehensible, I have to often ask for every word. (PL\_F1\_CH)

Children are also quick to notice favouritism towards certain pupils and assess this very critically, the more critical the teacher's behaviour becomes hypocritical as he asserts an equal approach to everyone:

CH: And the art teacher favours this A. [name of the student] so much that it's really as if her work doesn't look beautiful, as if it doesn't look ugly. It also seems to me that it's according to taste. Because some of her work is not the most beautiful, I wanted to point out... The best part is that he always says 'I don't favour anyone'. (PL\_F5\_CH)

Finally, bullying and intolerance from other peers is a problem. For some pupils, this leads to a preference for remote learning, because by staying at home they do not have to face resentment, teasing or exclusion:



I: At school there are people who sometimes either won't tolerate us or will be unkind to us, for no reason sometimes. And at home we're alone, without people like that who annoy me. I'm just alone, without my family who so well... But you know, I'm alone in my room and I'm very comfortable there. (PL\_F5\_CH)

### Ideal school

When asked about the ideal school, migrant pupils basically construct in their imagination a space devoid of the previously mentioned negative aspects. Some pupils would just change the appearance of the school, for a more mood-enhancing one:

CH: I would make it more colourful, you could say, because it's half grey and half orange, so I look at it strangely and I would make it more colourful, blue, red, green, colours like that (...) to make it cheerful, not gloomy, to make even some very cloudy days look cheerful, sunny. (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

For children, it is also important to have time to meet with friends, so there have been calls for less or no homework and longer breaks. It is also important for the school to be modern, to meet the technological expectations of young people, to have laptops or tablets at their disposal:

CH: Well, everything would be electronic there. There would be no notebooks, it would be all on the computer, on laptops. And there would be long breaks. (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Others point to problems that are more serious. An ideal school would be a place where teachers are fair and supportive to the students.

I: And if that was the kind of school you wanted to go to, what might it look like?

CH: I don't know. Well, maybe one where you don't have to write a lot and I don't know, they don't do that homework. And everything. (PL\_I5\_CH\_B)

I: And if you were to imagine your dream school, what would it look like, what kind of school would it be? Let your imagination run free a little bit.

CH: I don't really know.

I: What would it have to be like, what kind of people, what kind of teachers?

CH: Well fair teachers, that's the first thing. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

Relationships with teachers and their attitudes are an important element of an ideal school, from the interviews it appears that many changes are needed, since one student, when asked who she would like to have in her school, would not take any of the current teachers: "I would take some people that I really like with me. I wouldn't take any teachers. They are not bad, but I don't think I would take any teacher" (PL\_I22\_CH\_G). Other pupils mentioned one or two people, often an intercultural assistant, which shows how important this figure is for migrant children, a person who connects them to their new environment. However, they would like the teachers to be fair and give up things which according to them are unimportant and very individual, like the way they keep their notebooks.

To sum up, migrant children do not have very high expectations of an ideal school. In an ideal school there would be a good atmosphere, nobody would shout, it would be a good space for learning, the teachers would be supportive and give the children space for their own activities. Children appreciate empowerment and autonomy and migrant children would have their own distinct place - there would be food that includes dishes from their home country or conversations in their languages: "Eating what we want, without pork, Chechen food, or Turkish food. Lessons shorter, 35 minutes each. Good teachers, because [those we have] shout at us. To make everything easy, e.g. maths" (PL\_F3\_CH).

At the same time, some children were unwilling or unable to say what their dream school would look like, with some declaring that they like the way it is now. One of the pupils considers school as place of escape



and would like to stay there permanently. The dreams and proposals for change and the declarations that they like the school and even that they would like to stay there permanently, show the importance of school as a place of integration or exclusion, building or destroying relationships, fostering agency, or pushing them into hierarchical actions: “I like this school. I don't have dreams at all. It would be good to stay in school forever” (PL\_F2\_CH).

### 3. The affective and relational dimensions of school

In this section, we will look at children's relationships at school, especially with their peers. We will investigate the factors facilitating and hindering social interactions, such as language proficiency and the school environment. Special attention will be paid to the way conflicts are handled and how children realize their agency in difficult social situations. Finally, we will look at ways to support children, both at school and at home.

#### Factors hindering/facilitating peer relations

Social contacts play an important role in children's narratives. The intensity and character of peer relations vary considerably depending on the situation of each child, the school context, their family situation, and localisation. Children talked about having many relationships with peers both in school and after school, with Polish children and those speaking their native language. However, we have also encountered cases where migrant children did not have any Polish friends, and only kept in touch with friends (or even just one friend) with whom they could speak Russian/Ukrainian/Belarusian. In the following paragraphs, we will show the various situations of friendship practices.

#### Language as an important factor in peer relationships

When asked about relations with peers, children often referred to their beginnings in a new place and the challenge of establishing contacts with colleagues given the existence of a language barrier. Most of the children did not speak Polish on arrival and establishing peer relations was difficult. They often mentioned feeling excluded from the class:

Well, at the very beginning, when I just came to the class, I just saw from my perspective, there were these separate groups and I just tried to join one of those and just at the very beginning it was a bit difficult and I felt a bit, I don't know, rejected, because I didn't know the language either and it was just difficult to get along with anyone. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

The language barrier causes distance from Polish children and hence many migrant children stick together with others who speak the same language, especially if they attend the same class.

I: What is it like with friends?

CH: Well, now I talk more with my friend who's from Ukraine, because it's easier to talk in Polish, but there are also friends from the dances, and they're more Polish-speaking there. Well, there's a lot of Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians at the dances. (PL\_I1\_CH\_G,)

In some cases, although children did not speak Polish, they were able to make friends with Polish pupils. One of the girls talked about the situation when one of the pupils from the new class just approached her and began a close friendship. This relation helped the migrant girl to settle in the class, learn Polish and establish relations with other children from school:

I: When you came to this class in September, what was it like with your friends then?

CH: Well, a girl sat down with me, her name was Lena and she sits with me now and she's a very nice girl, because she sat with me from the first day.(...)

I: And when you go back to school [after the pandemic], how was it now in May?



## Child-Up

CH: She sits with me too and helps too.

Intercultural assistant: But it's better now [with the language], well what are you already....

I: Because everyone started writing to me or talking to me. (PL\_I14\_CH\_G)

Knowledge of Polish was very helpful for migrant children who had been learning Polish before migrating to Poland. They talked about having an easier start at school and claimed that making new friendships was quite easy.

### Sports

One of the factors which helped children integrate with peers was sport, and this was usually mentioned by boys. One of the interviewed children meets regularly with other boys in the neighbourhood to play. He also takes part in tournaments with the school team. This gained him friends, a sense of respect and agency after only one year after arrival in Poland.

CH: Well, everything was fine. The first day I was on the street, well everything was fine. Then in August, when I was playing soccer with my brother and my friend. We played, there were some boys on the field and we played with them and it turned out that one of the boys was from Russia and now he's my friend, so everything was fine. (...) On Sundays or Saturdays I often get together with my classmates and play football.

I: Great, because you all live close by?

CH: Well, yes. We just play either here on the pitch, or on the pitch...there, ( ...)in the park it is.

I: Were there any events at school, in class, which were not lessons, some competitions, going out somewhere?

CH: Well, for example, on Monday I played... I wasn't in lessons because I played football for the school.

I: Are you on the school football team?

CH: Yeah.

I: In some tournament?

CH: Mhm.

I: And there are some guys from your class there too?

CH: Yes, 2 from my class were and 4 boys from 7<sup>th</sup> class I think.

I: These are the best ones who play football?

CH: Well, yeah.

I: So I guess you're happy to be on that team?

CH: Mhm. I still have my jersey free of charge. (PL\_I7\_CH\_B)

### Proximity to friends

Living in a big city helps to maintain contacts with peers after school since usually all children from school live close to the school, therefore they live close to each other in the same neighbourhood. Children meet after school and spend time together in the neighbourhood.

CH: Well, with Tomek, with Natasza and with Adrian after lessons I always come home, change my clothes, eat, take my phone and a backpack with water, a mask and go there, to the alleys, to my friends. (...) I walk all over the alley. I also tried with my friends there to the shop, we buy something there. (PL\_I8\_CH\_B)

I: And a week ago, I also spoke to CH. Yes, she was here, and she said you were friends.



## Child-Up

CH: Yeah.

I: And that you walk a lot.

CH: Yeah.

I: Well, where do you go?

CH: Everywhere.

I: Playground? Some ice cream place?

CH: To the playground and we like to go to such, such places..., I don't know, some strange places. (...)

I: You can do it on your own, you have time, your parents let you?

CH: Yhm. (PL\_I6\_CH\_G)

### Cultural differences: between curiosity and hostility

Until recently, Polish society has been very homogenous and children in Poland did not have many relationships with children from other countries, especially at school. Hence, pupils are interested in various aspects of migrant children's lives. Here, a migrant boy relates to a situation when a couple of boys asked him about his religion.

CH: Well, I remember Ms. Marta joining me with other boys who wanted to go to PE. I remember those boys; they were sitting there. I..., well it was very new for me that, well then they came, then after the lesson together to the cloakroom (...) And bit by bit they started asking me what religion I was. Well, I then..., I don't know what they were saying, whether ortho religion, some other, non-Christian. And I think that then, and they say. And it's always they may ask me about this question I identified as baptized..., well, that's Christian. Well then, on and on, no straight, as always, the lesson of the beginning, (...) the first day of school. Well, I don't remember how many days came from the first day of school. The boys asked me what my religion is.

And then I, as soon as I understood what they were talking about, I said that I was from the Orthodox Church. And they asked, they didn't ask....; they didn't ask [anymore] what religion I was.

I: And why did they ask you that?

CH: I don't know, I don't know why, but for sure it was interesting.

I: That they were just curious about it.

CH: Yes.

I: But that, tell me, that was so nice for you? Or not really? Because I don't quite feel like that. Was the question asked in such a nice way? Or was it kind of unkind? How did you feel at the time?

CH: They, well they, as I remember they didn't look, like, (ns - 00:10:08) at me, and they didn't want to do anything. So they asked him normally. (PL\_I3\_CH\_B).

Special interest in religion on the part of children can be surprising. It seems to us that adults (e.g. a religion teacher) might have inspired it or it could have resulted from the fact that the boy does not attend religion classes.<sup>5</sup>

In other cases, the fact that children come from another country contributed to their marginalization in class.

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<sup>5</sup> In Poland 80% of children attend Catholic religion classes and this is a common situation in Poland.



## Child-Up

I: Have you had situations where you or someone else was treated worse?

CH: I don't know if I was, because almost nobody liked me because I'm from another country.

I: Was it like that or is it like that all the time?

CH: I don't know if it's like that all the time now because we are remote, but it was when we were at school.

I: How can you help in such situations?

CH: I don't know, because we're about to finish eighth grade and everyone goes to a different school, so there's no time to do anything anymore. (PL\_I9\_CH\_G)

### School environment

We also noticed the importance of a supportive school environment for building relationships between migrant and Polish children. Here, the role of school administration, the sensitivity to migrant children's needs and welcoming attitude from the headteacher of the class were crucial for establishing peer relations.

On the other hand, a lack of commitment to creating good conditions for children significantly hindered their integration. We identified cases where children did not encounter a friendly reception and even experienced discrimination from the headmaster. These children talked about their experiences with difficulty and we can observe their marginalised position and a feeling of alienation in their narratives.

CH: I don't like my classmates.

I: And they're behaving uncoolly?

CH: Yeah.

I: Towards you?

CH: Not now, but there were situations in the past.

I: They were unkind to you and now it has changed?

CH: And I just don't talk to them.

I: And are they unkind to you, or two other girls?

CH: For me and for my friend from Belarus. (...) I just sit by myself. Sometimes someone sits down with me and I just don't talk in class, they just sit.

I: What do you do during breaks?

CH: I sit behind the bench and do something. (...) And I just don't talk to them.

I: Do you have a friend from Poland?

CH: No.

I: From class?

CH: No. I still have a friend, Jelena.

I: Jelena, she's from the Ukraine too?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I6\_CH\_G)

The lack of acceptance by children took effect in the child's negative attitude towards school. One of the girls we interviewed felt so isolated and spurned by the class that she suffered from school phobia. The stress of going to school was so strong that she was unable to walk into the school building<sup>6</sup>. As a result,

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<sup>6</sup> We know about these situations mainly from the intercultural mediators who assisted during the interviews with children and commented on the children's situation during the interview.



she had to shift to individual learning and it was only later, after the engagement of an intercultural assistant and during a better stage in the pandemic, that the girl started to join her class once a week.

A welcoming reception of a migrant child and engagement from the school administration and teachers also influences the peer relations. A girl from Nigeria received support from teachers both in learning and in contact with other children (by allowing pupils to use internet translators) which led to the establishment of good peer relations

I: How did you get on with colleagues?

CH: At the beginning, I was using flashcards so everybody could understand English (...) and also helping me to translate to the student. And some of them were also trying to communicate with me in English. So it was good.

I: Did you make any friends at school?

CH: Yeah. I made a lot of friends. I have some friends now. So yes.

I: And what are the names of your closest friends?

CH: I'd say Kuba, Ala. Piotr is from another class. Ala is from the same class as I. Ala, Kasia, from also from my class. I think those are like closest to me.

I: Do you spend time with them also after school.

CH: Not really. But recently I was spending time with Kuba after school. Like, for example, go to the park, we sit like under the swing. We talk to each other and then go home.

I: And, for example, did your colleagues in class help you with learning?

CH: Yes. Ala helped me. She helped me. (PL\_I22\_CH\_G)

Most of the refugee children attend small-scale schools with years of experience in teaching migrant children in small rural communities. They experience school as a welcoming space and view their entire class as friends. In such cases, there are usually a couple of migrant children in one class, sometimes migrant children constitute the larger part of the class. Children from this environment usually did not mention conflict or situation when other pupils would not accept them or marginalise.

I: And how many classmates, friends or classmates, did you have?

CH: I had friends all of them.

I: Who did you get along with best? (...) Was it the entire class?

CH: The entire class. (...). But Zuza was so nice. She was sweet.

I: Jagoda was from Poland?

CH: Yes. From Poland. (...) My classmates helped me a lot. For example, I forgot my scissors at home; they gave me scissors. And so, that's how it was. Yeah.

I: Is that how they helped you? If you forgot something. They did? And if you didn't know something in class, for example?

CH: Yes. They helped me then too. (...) We did not quarrel. (...) I had no other difficult situations. (PL\_I25\_CH\_G)

CH: I like to sit with them [pupils in my class], I like to talk about grades, about papers, that did you do this, did you do homework and they say, well yes we did or will you give your work, I'll do it and I'll give it to you, well yes I will. (...) We help each other. (...) If someone has difficulties with classes or can't read, can't do it, then one person will help them with reading, with doing papers, and talk to you. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

I: And do you help each other in class for example?



CH: Yes, everyone helps each other because no one wants to see another person hurt or feel sad. And everyone always helps everyone. (PL\_I26\_CH\_B)

### Children's agency in conflict situations

Conflict situations are a part of school life. Children recalled such situations which often arise on the basis on ethnic discrimination. These cases are discussed in the part on the intercultural relations at school. Here, we will discuss the cases of interpersonal conflicts which were not assigned by children as arising from their status as migrant pupils.

Children, usually boys, refer often to violence between peers, which arises in interpersonal conflicts. These are conflicts over the unwanted consequences of their actions (like hitting someone during play), but also they talked about acts of deliberate aggression. Very often children try to take resolve those conflicts by themselves.

CH: One time I got beaten up. It happened because he made me angry a bit, because he started saying such nasty things to my two friends, so he annoyed me. And I went to the teacher before, and she said, well stop it. And then he still came up and started a pulling my hair. And I hit him. I didn't know where I was hitting him, and I hit him in the stomach. And I kind of knew afterwards that it wasn't special, and everybody forgot about it.

I: Did anyone help you resolve the situation?

CH: No.

I: So did they just all forget?

CH: Yes.

I: Do difficult situations like this happen in your class or at school?

CH: Yes. Again, my friends got into a fight together, only without me anymore, because they were a kind of having fun, only I don't know if they really had fun or fighting. (PL\_I12\_CH\_G)

There are also situations when play takes form of fight, which does not have any conflicts in background and is a form of contact especially between boys

CH: I have this boy at school, Tomek, everyone says we fight and we just play. They don't let us play normally.

I: Why do you think they say that?

CH: Because we are having fun fighting. (PL\_I13\_CH\_B)

A child's agency is mostly realised when children solve a difficult situation or conflict themselves without referring to adults. Addressing peers directly is preferred in interpersonal conflicts; children often mention they do not want to engage teachers in order not to exaggerate the situation and this also strengthens the children's sense of agency.

I: Do you sometimes quarrel with your classmates about something? Are there any problems in class?

CH: Well, once I argued with them. Yes, for 2 days. But then we settled everything. Because we had that time remotely, after all. We had Teams. So I arranged it with Zuzka, my friend, and she arranged everything, and then we agreed. And we just... we just don't go on like that, we don't argue anymore. There was only one time.

I: Do you remember what it was about?



## Child-Up

CH: No, I don't remember. It would have been in March or April.

I: Was it just you who quarrelled, or did several people quarrel?

CH: Only that I had a fight with my friends. Then for two entire days I didn't go to them. And on the third day I didn't go, then we settled everything, reconciled and one thing like that. (PL\_I8\_CH\_B)

CH: Well, nothing like that has happened to me, but my other classmate recently had a situation like that, but I don't know... It's just that one friend threw the ball at the other, it's just an argument. And that was it.

I: And what happened then?

CH: And one boy threw the ball to the other one and the other one cried, but then he came and apologised and asked if it was all right, and that he was sorry, and they made up and now everything is ok. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

When children feel they can manage by themselves, they do not want to bother the teachers and keep cases of harassment to themselves.

I: Did you tell your headteacher how you had these enemies?

CH: No, I didn't tell her not to tell me, that you have some problems, because you have your problems, a lot of kids have their problems, that's where someone insults them, that Dawid, I just hate him too, I can't hold on. We play with him there. For example, he just comes up and beats me in the back. He just comes up and beats me in the back. (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

Children feel a sense of agency when they can resolve the conflict with peers who hold hostile attitude towards them and turn from enemies to friends, as with one boy from Ukraine. There were two boys at his school who were hostile towards him because of his ethnicity. However, with time, he made a closer relationship with one boy and finally they became friends.

CH: I only had two, so to speak, opponents. It seems I didn't like them, so there they talked some, there they talked some bad, so to speak.

I: Did they talk about you?

CH: Well, not only about me. Generally they didn't like the fact that I was the first student from Ukraine, and so they showed themselves, that they were so proud of themselves, that they were so cool, and that I was from Ukraine and such a nobody, you could say. And recently I think I had one opponent, so to speak, on my side. I had a lot of friends from the beginning, and now I have a lot, so not even a whole class, maybe even the whole class. And I still have so from this opponent, from the two of them, one.

I: How did it happen that you dragged him to your side?

CH: I don't even know. We just started talking and he started smiling at me somehow and such trivial things, and we become friends. (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

## School and family environment as a source of support for the children

### Intercultural assistants

A huge source of support for children are intercultural assistants and this was noticed in children's narratives but also in the whole process of conducting interviews. Some of the interviews were possible only because intercultural assistant was present. There were children who had experienced stress and trauma in school and the intercultural assistant mediated between us and the child, also adding some details and context to child's narrative.

CH: The most fortunate thing is that we have Mr Volodymyr.



## Child-Up

I: He is your cultural assistant?

(...)

I: And what does Mr Volodymyr do? (...)

CH's mother: He does everything

CH: Well, everything. Maybe he's like a translator.

Intercultural assistants are both helpful with assignments and the language, but also with any problem that arises at school.

I: But there is also a little bit and Mrs. Bohuslava, there are some people who can help you?

CH: Yes, Mrs Bohuslava helps very well with classes, also with missing tasks.

I: And Mrs Bohuslava is with you in lessons sometimes?

CH: And she is the one who has access to the missing task, to the teachers.

I: And she reminds you that something needs to be done?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

Intercultural assistants play a crucial role in children's adaptation at schools, since they know exactly the situation of each migrant child, the children's biggest concerns, challenges, and successes. We also noticed that in difficult situations, especially in conflicts with teachers, intercultural assistants stood up for children at the school administration.

### Teachers

Children usually turn to the teachers when experiencing conflicts. Especially younger kids, age 10-11, would ask the teacher to help resolving problems, report problematic situations or cases of harassment.

CH: Well, it seems to me that it is best to approach a teacher, or just an older person, and that is the best solution, really. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

CH: With the teacher it's with the music teacher, when he sees me in the corridor with such sadness or if I'm just sitting, he'll call me over and ask me what's going on, and what happened. (PL\_I27\_CH\_B)

I: And how do you deal with this problem?

CH: We tell this to the teacher.

I: And what the teacher does about it?

CH: She gives them a warning.

I: In the electronic communicator for parents?

CH: No, she reminds the boys that she can give it.

I: But she doesn't actually give, right?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I18\_CH\_G)

Sometimes, albeit rarely, after children seek support from teachers, they discuss the conflict situation with the entire class during a community meeting.

CH: There was this one situation, the boys always got a phone and when, for example, Kamila wanted to get a phone because she wanted to send something to her mum, then the boys started shouting: "no phone allowed in class" and so the battle started.

I: So how did you tell anyone about it? Did you say that such a war between boys and girls?

CH: Then we told the teacher.



I: And what was her reaction?

CH: Well, we talked about it during the community meeting. (PL\_I19\_CH\_G)

### Cooperation between teachers and parents in conflict situations

In cases of harassment, children often turn both to teachers and parents. Parents also visit school in order to support their children. An example of such a situation is when both the teacher and parent were highlighted as sources of support:

I: Your colleagues, or friends, did they quarrel about anything? Nobody, for example, said that, well, why did you come to Poland? Nobody, you've never heard such a bad term, have you?

CH: No, only one girl said that, from another class.

I: What did she say, tell you?

CH: Well, once I asked her if I could take her toy, she said, you can, I pressed something there, she said, don't press it, and why did you come to Poland? I don't understand, I pressed something and she got offended.

I: And what did you say to her, when she said why did you come to Poland?

CH: I didn't say anything to her, like my mum suggested, I just went to my friends, to Taras, to Ilja and to Marek.

I: And you told mum about this?

CH: Yes.

M: And what did mum say then?

CH: Mum said, don't pay attention to it.

I: And to the teacher, did you complain to the teacher?

CH: Yes, because mum said so. She was very sad then.

I: Oh, so the teacher reacted, so that...

CH: Yes, teacher told me that she shouldn't have said that to me.

I: Mum said don't pay attention to it, well don't you think mum, well she should call the teacher too and tell her?

CH: Well, mum already talked to the teacher once. Mum spoke to the PE teacher and the PE teacher said that, well I know she'd already spoken [to the girl – AR] and she said, well, not to..., well no, [that is should have] never happened, so she called the girl's mum and said that.

I: And what did her mum say to that? You know? Did it get to you somewhere?

CH: Well, no.

I: You don't know, right, what they were like. And now you're talking to this girl? Or are you two just avoiding each other like that?

CH: Well I'm talking because she's already said, "I'm sorry I said that". (PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

For many children, their parents are a great support, they trust them and can talk with them about any difficult situation in school.

I: Do you also talk about it with your siblings, what you like at school and what you don't like? Or is it just with your friends?

CH: With my family too, mostly with my mum, whatever happens or doesn't happen at school, I also tell my mum or my brother sometimes, you know what, I scored a goal today in football. And he's happy too, because his brother was like that, like that, that's why it was very good for him too. (...) And for example, would your parents, mum or dad, come to school to help, to solve a school problem?



## Child-Up

CH: More like they are, less often, if there was such a problem that my mum or dad had to come to school, only at parents' meeting it was always my mum.

I: So but if you had to, would parents come?

CH: She would come straight away.

I: For example, if there were any problems, would your parents help you to solve them?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I26\_CH\_B)

Children usually ask parents to intervene if they cannot cope by themselves with conflict or when conflict last for a longer period, however the intervention of adults not always seen as a long run solution.

CH: If I have a problem with a colleague or he insults me or says something, I won't do anything, I'll tell the father, then the father will tell the director that this boy insulted my son and that's why. And if he insulted me, that I would do something to him, then it would be a problem for us. That would be a problem, that's why I'm not touching anyone, I'll just tell the father, so that the father will tell the director. (PL\_I27\_CH\_B)

## Siblings

Parents not always can be a source of support usually because their lack of language skills or lack of time. Often it is the older sibling that is more trusted person for children than parents, especially if parents stricter. In such cases, children turn to older siblings with their worries.

I: Can you talk to your parents about school? Are they curious about what's going on with you?

CH: Well, yes, but we not usually talk about school.

I: But if you need to talk to someone, who can you talk to?

CH: Well, Anastasia, my friend.

I: What about an adult?

CH: My sister.

I: Oh, yeah, you can always talk to your sister. And you tell each other how you're doing at school?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I5\_CH\_G)

In another case it was the older brother who came first to Poland and prepared the arrival of the whole family. He speaks Polish very well, has a good job and is well informed about the procedures and living arrangement in Poland.

I: Your brother lives with you?

CH: Well, yes. He just helps his parents a bit more.

I: So when you arrived, everything was ready?

CH: Yeah, yeah. There was already a flat, so that's all right, yeah.

I: And now your brother is helping you too?

CH: Yes.

I: What do you do together?

CH: Well, if I have homework, if I don't understand something, my brother helps.

I: Do you spend your free time together?



## Child-Up

CH: Yes, we play football and computer games. And also, for example, when we play computer games and a boy from Poland plays with us and if I say something wrong, he helps me. (...)

I: So he also supports you in Polish?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I7\_CH\_B, Item 99-115)

### Educational aspirations

Almost all children discussed their learning experience in a positive way. The school is seen as a space where they can develop their skills, gain knowledge and develop their interests.

I: Why is it worth learning and going to school?

CH: Well, knowledge in different fields, in different subjects, which can discover, let's say someone likes maths or foreign languages and later he/she can decide about his/her profession. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

Children referred to a variety of subjects. Most often they talked about the major subjects which dominate the curriculum such as Mathematics and Polish, but they also mentioned Biology, IT classes, Music or Art. However, their experiences with these classes varied. They highly evaluated subjects which they find important and interesting, which are in line with their own interests or in which they are good at. The key factor in shaping children's relations to learning is the teacher. Children trust in a teacher when they sense his/her positive approach to pupils. This is reflected in devoting his/her time to provide clear explanation, creating a possibility to improve the grades and inclusive learning approach. Such features provide a sense of security in children, which develops an intrinsic motivation for learning, boost children's motivation and engagement as well as academic and social competence.

I: What subject do you like best?

CH: English.

I: And why?

CH: Because I get good marks there and we have a nice teacher. (PL\_I18\_CH\_G)

[talking about favourite subject] Math. I don't study for the maths test because I know I'll get a good grade anyway, because I'm probably the best at maths. (PL\_I11C)

I think that children learn better if teachers don't give grades. And when children do something wrong, the teacher helps to correct the grade or explains it. Then the kids want to learn. But if the teacher shouts and says that everybody is bad in the subject, then the kids don't want to learn, it's all up to the teacher. But when the teacher helps the child, then grades are not important, the child wants to learn." (PL\_FGI4\_CH)

The most varied opinions were expressed with respect to the Polish classes. Children who were more proficient in Polish often emphasized that they did not face major challenges in this subject:

I do very well [in Polish]. In an exam or a test, it was always fours or fives. The teacher always praised. I say I'm good at Polish. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

Others who have not yet gained proficiency in Polish talked about their difficulties. At the same time, they often believe that if they reach a more advance level of Polish, they would no longer face challenges in this subject. The key factor in building their confidence and a sense of self-efficacy about their achievements was their parents' support. This helped children to accept their gaps in Polish as temporary and to overcome barriers to learning Polish. Children also developed their intrinsic motivation for learning Polish – as most of them plan to stay in Poland, they would like to communicate fluently in this language.



The children are rather ambitious. Although they care about their grades, it turned out that they are also driven by intrinsic motivation: putting greater value on learning itself and learning for the sake of their own satisfaction.

I: Are these school grades important to you?

CH: Well, they're important to some extent, but I think that knowledge is more important than marks, because sometimes we can get really stressed and write something wrong, miss something, but we still have knowledge. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

For those who are in the final class of primary school, grades are especially important as access to secondary school depends on them. For younger children, the grades are necessary to get promoted to the following class. Some children also talked about the importance of grades in order to make their parents proud:

I: And tell me, are school grades important to you?

CH: Very important.

I: Why?

CH: Because if I get a three I want to improve it to a four or a five very quickly.

I: But why do you want to improve? Why?

CH: So that when they give me a certificate, it's always four or five. No threes.

I: But why do you care so much that the certificate has fours and fives?

CH: It's for my dad.

I: So that your dad can see that you have these grades? Is that the most important thing to you?

CH: Yes. When I always get four or five, I always look forward to the lesson being over, I always go to my dad, he's not there, he's at work and I can't wait for him to come. And when he comes, then dad, look what I got. Then my dad, oh, very good, you learnt. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

Having supportive parents who appreciate children's grades and encourage them to work affects children's self-esteem and their academic performance. Therefore, it is important to effectively involve parents in their children's education and help them to encourage children to learn. This is especially important in the case of parents from neighbouring countries who are unfamiliar with the Polish grading system and the way they see the grades is different from their true meaning. The problem of unclear grading system was also noted by a migrant girl who admitted that "It seems to be fair but I do not entirely understand it". Therefore, both the parents and the children must not only be informed about the grades but also given a clear explanation of how children's work is evaluated.

In general, children perceived the grading system and grades as just and fair, with only a few children expressing the opposite opinion. Children often boasted about their good grades:

Are you satisfied with your grades?

Yes, because I've only got Z, W, Z, W, Z, D+, Z with a minus, W, because I've got sixes, fives.

So a Z is the highest, right?



W is the highest, which is a six, and Z is a five. D is a four, P is a three, M is a two, and then I don't know. (PL\_I12\_CH\_G)

Having good grades translates into higher self-esteem and helps to develop self-respect:

When I get 5 or even 6, my teacher says: you have written it very well, and that is very pleasant for me. (PL\_F2\_CH)

The grades are also important as a motivational tool – having lower grades encouraged children to fill in the gap in their knowledge and to achieve high grades. As the participants of the focus group admitted: “we become annoyed when we fail”. (PL\_F1\_CH)

But the grades help more if a person gets some worse grades and (s)he has to improve, they have to say to themselves, oh, I got such a worse grade, I have to study a bit more and improve more. I rather do that, that's why it helped me a lot. (PL\_I26\_CH)

Only some children indicated that their educational achievements depended on gender.

Because boys are better at PE and run fast.

Boys have it easier in gym class. What other subjects do they have it easier in?

- In our case in [our] the class they don't, probably they are better only in gym.

And what are girls best at?

- Girls are [better] in almost everything. (OL\_I19\_CH\_D)

A few children admitted that they had experienced unjust grading. Such situations concerned either unequal treatment and the clear preferences of a teacher or a lack of a teacher's consent to improve a grade.

(..) in some situations, with some teachers, if they like someone less, they can even lower a grade sometimes. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

(...) it depends on the subject, it depends on the situation (...) but for example in Polish, for example, in maths, for example, in the more important subjects, it happens that they don't grade very fairly, And in the rest of the subjects I think the grades are [just]. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

Yes, it [being treated unfair] happened to me more than once, for example, I was half a point short of a better mark and, for example, another person got that half a point for, I don't know, simply underlining something in a sentence and I underlined it too, for example, but [a teacher] simply didn't approve it and said that I didn't deserve the better mark. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

Parents and pupils focus on grades as a way of communicating how much knowledge a pupil has gained. They rely on the grading system as an objective way of measuring educational achievement and value good grades highly because they matter for admission to secondary school and even job applications. Since grades are seen as important measure of success, children often felt under pressure from teachers, schools, and parents. The grading system is internalized to the extent that it is barely questioned by pupils and parents. The negative impact on overall educational performance and progress, pupils' health, self of worth and intrinsic motivation was rarely noted by children. Only some of them complained that grades are not the best reflection of a pupil's abilities and knowledge. In their opinion, the grading system provides the illusion of an objective way of assessing children's performance as it does not take into account factors such as stress, anxiety and their academic performance pressure.



Well, (...) they [marks] don't fully reflect our knowledge, because let's say someone may understand something, but one day, let's say he/she didn't repeat something, or he/she forgot it because of stress and just got a mark worse than he thought, than he assumed. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

For the majority of children, completing school is important for their future. In the short-term, primary school is a first step for further education, including both secondary school and higher education. In the long-term, education is the basis for getting a good job and establishing a family:

I: Why is it worth learning?

CH: To have a good job, a good family, so that everyone respects them. (PL\_I27\_CH\_B)

Education is perceived as opening up opportunities for children to become whoever they want in the future.

### Learning support

Regarding the possibilities for support in a challenging situation for a migrant pupil, the children mentioned all actors involved in school. The most frequently mentioned were parents, close friends and teachers. They are the ones who are perceived to be the most important by the pupils in the school relationship and able to give advice or support (both regarding learning matters and interpersonal challenges).

I: So when you have a problem or something is bothering you, who do you turn to first?

CH: To my mother I can, to Valentina [friend] and to the teacher. Yes. [PL\_I2\_CH\_B]

Highlighting teachers may prove the importance of the school environment and school structures in overcoming barriers faced by pupils. Children appreciate a teacher's openness, flexibility and encouragement to develop a passion for learning and to believe in themselves. Among the strategies developed by teachers, migrant children listed the following: preparing easier tests, additional explanations during tests to better understand instructions or having an opportunity to improve their grades. Yet, children do not expect and do not want teachers to help them out by providing them with a ready-made solution.

In terms of family support, children inform parents about the difficulties and appreciate their help in solving problems. Their interventions led to coming up with feasible and tailor-made solutions for their children. While parents are involved in contacts with school, migrant children also mentioned about their siblings who help them with their homework.

Sporadically, migrant children are supported by volunteers who carry out additional classes (e.g. from Polish) for them or a private tutor for additional, after-school classes. Both types of interventions aim at narrowing the existing knowledge gap between migrant and non-migrant children. It is important, however, to look at this phenomenon from broader context as migrant children are not an exception and they are aware that other children often use the support of a private tutor.

CH: I've just got extra Polish lessons and I'm catching up with the material from the old classes, because, well, in the younger classes I was weaker in Polish and now I'm just catching up with the material from the old classes.

I: Are these lessons taught by a Polish teacher from your class or by someone else?

CH: No, from another school.

I: So what do you think about these extra lessons?

CH: Well, I think these additional lessons have given me a lot and I like the teacher very much, she explains things well and...



I: Whose initiative was it to go for those lessons?

CH: Well, for sure it was my mum's initiative, but it was more mine, because I felt I needed it, because in a year's time when I'll be writing exams I simply won't keep up and I won't have much knowledge. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

The above quotation also shows that children do not necessarily look for external support (e.g. of parents) but they can seek out strategies on their own. This can be seen as a sign of their agency: they can identify their needs on their own and define the type of support needed. They can also present their standpoint and arguments to teachers. As one of the girls described (PL\_I22\_C\_G), she decided to talk to the director of the school about her difficulties in Polish and, as a result of her intervention, a cultural assistant was hired to help her during the classes.

### Children's agency: the classroom context

Children's opportunities to have their voice heard at schools seem to be limited. Usually it is the teacher who decides what, when and how something will be learned and how to organize classes.

Nonetheless we can refer to situations on the classroom level, showing the diversity of context where children can act and have an influence on their learning environment. First, the children's perspective is acknowledged in the grading process, affecting the children-teacher relation.

I: Well what then, you didn't fight for yourself?

CH: Well, that's when I said to a teacher that it wasn't very fair, that for example my friend had done the same task as me and why did she get more points than me when I should have got the same amount, and you said that it was a bit of a different system of evaluation, because with her it was like a grade neither for minus nor for plus. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

As the example above shows, the girl was not afraid to present her standpoint and the teacher provided a space for a dialogue, she was not reluctant to engage and provide additional explanation. Such an approach may enhance children agency and help to build a positive relationship between teacher and pupils.

The second example illustrating the inclusion of children's voices is connected with the collective actions of evaluating children's behaviour and performance. It shows how children can be engaged in an open discussion, express their capacity to act as agents. What seems to be important is that from the girl's perspective, such approach developed a sense of responsibility and agency which she evaluated positively.

I: How do you decide on the mark for your behaviour? Does the teacher decide alone or do you decide too?

CH: As I remember we always decided what the grade would be.

I: What did it look like?

- We wrote the name on the blackboard and a teacher said, for example, how many was negative comments someone had, or if he/she got any, and then we had to decide whether if it was 4 or 5, or an A for behaviour.

I: How did you feel about it?

CH: I felt good about it. (PL\_I9\_CH\_G)

### Educational aspirations and future plans

The findings of our research proves that primary school is often seen as an important step in developing future educational choices. All of the children admitted that they wanted to continue their education, at least up to the point of completing secondary school. Many respondents also talked about going to university. Having such plans in mind, they argued that completing primary school with good grades would increase their chance to be accepted in a good secondary school and later at university. Yet, some children



also talked about their 'lost' experiences, passions which they could not develop in Poland due to cultural differences or limited economic resources.

The children also linked educational achievements with the opportunity of getting an interesting job and developing a successful career. Boys most frequently talked about professions related to the IT sector: they would like to create animated films or to become youtubers, bloggers, graphic designers or computer programmers. A few boys talked about careers in engineering, but also in acting or travelling around the world, while one boy stated that he would like to serve in the Ukrainian army.

I would think that I'm an actor, a bit of a very famous actor, and I receive invitations to act in this scene or in these commercials, and in the sense that in the future my brother would say to me, you see, brother, you studied, you succeeded, and you're now such an important, famous actor, and how do you think, well follow your dream, should I also follow my dream? And that would be good for me. (PL\_I26\_CH\_B).

In most cases, their imagined future profession is related to their interests, as in the example below:

I imagine myself a programmer of various things and a robots' builder. I have a lot of Lego and if I had motors and everything like that, I could make a car. (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Some boys are also driven by an example, wanting to either follow their family members or their friends into a particular field:

I want to become a doctor because his grandfather was a doctor and when I was born they told him he would be a doctor. He will continue his studies, in 15 years he will still be studying but he will also have a family.(PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

I: Who would you like to be in the future?

CH: Well, I want to be a policeman, but...

I: Why a policeman?

CH: Well, because Kuba's dad is a policeman, and Kuba says, that I want to be a policeman too, and I want to be with him.(PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

Some boys emphasized that it is important to choose a profession which helps to create better and more just societies while for others having high income was one of the main criteria:

A policeman. Because he earns a lot and helps people. (PL\_F3\_CH)

Border guard - you can earn well like that. My father used to say. (PL\_F3\_CH)

Girls had more varied ideas about their future careers: from becoming a cook or a confectioner, a dressmaker, a teacher, an artist, a fashion model and a policewoman, a border guard, a traveller, a doctor or an attorney. Their narratives showed that girls are not limited by the cultural models of female careers and want to choose professions in fields still dominated by men.

I would like to make cakes and sell them. Because I bake myself and I like it. (PL\_F4\_CH)

I: And why that choice, it's terribly difficult, no, to put bones together at all?

CH: Well terribly difficult, but I'm just very interested in biology, I'm doing very well in biology, I just find it interesting. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

(...) because there's a lot of work there [working as an attorney], you have to learn a lot, there are a lot of puzzles. PL\_F1\_CH)

My sister's friend is studying to become a police officer and I want the same. (PL\_F1\_CH)

I want to work in the Border Guard, because when we went to the Border Guard for interrogations, there were women working there and I liked that. (PL\_F1\_CH)



It is also important to note that some children (both girls and boys) seemed to have a precise plan for their future:

I: And why [do you think] about medicine?

CH: Well, yes, I want to be a dentist.

I: When you talk about your future, where do you see it?

CH: Here in Krakow, I want to go to a chemistry-biology high school and then, when I pass the exam, it will be clear. (PL\_I1\_CH\_G)

Meanwhile, many children have vague ideas about their future, admitting that “they do not know” or they hesitated before giving the answer.

Children’s interests are supported by parents who want them to pursue their passions by signing children up for workshops, extra classes etc. Such involvement of parents may be seen as a form of support, but it can be also a form of subtle pressure to follow particular career paths. Such pressure is reflected in children’s narration as their choices are driven by the opinion of an important other who advised them to choose a particular career path.

In addition to education and career aspirations, children also talked about family as a priority in their future life. The role of gender plays an important role here. While family is a part of boys’ and girls’ future plans – importantly only after completing their education and building well-established career - some of the girls admitted that they have to negotiate their choices. They are expected to get married just after reaching marriageable age – a role that they resist and want to postpone.

### Schools during the pandemic

The research was conducted after almost a year and a half of Covid-19 pandemic, when children had already experienced different modes of teaching: from the online teaching in a condition of strict regulation to relatively short periods of regular classes conducted at school (see section on Methodology). During the second school lockdown, in the autumn of 2020, online teaching was no longer seen as an exception or a short episode in pupils’ lives but rather a part of their educational path. They had more expectations towards online classes than during the first lockdown in March 2020 and become more critical – and some of them more tired – of online teaching. Overall, pupils claimed that online teaching posed several difficulties. Compared to the online teaching during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, technical and logistic issues were not the most important problem, although some children talked about a lack of proper equipment and lack of knowledge how to use online teaching software. Even if this problem occurred, it had been already solved as children were already equipped with computers or laptops by schools or NGOs. Some children still lacked a proper working space as they needed to either share it with siblings or change it with other members of the family. However, they usually do not perceive it as a huge problem and had developed and tested solutions which helped them to organize their work.

I: And the place at home?

CH: It was difficult.

I: And how do you solve it?

CH: I sit and my sister, who is 3 years younger than me, sit in the main room. The oldest [sister] sits in the next room. And the youngest [brother] is at school. (PL\_I9\_CH\_G)

Well Ilia or I was in the kitchen and Ilia, well we changed every day, and so I was in the kitchen, the next time I was in the big room and so on. (PL\_I11\_CH\_B)

An unstable and weak Internet connection was more of a problem. It was mentioned by many children who pointed to problems either on the teacher’s side or their own. They talked, among others, about buffering



films, being disconnected or having difficulties in hearing what others were saying, all problems which affected the learning process. Children could not fully and actively participate in classes, they missed information related to their homework and they could not understand their teachers.

Unstable connection. It was difficult. Throws off the lesson. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

CH: To be honest, there were some [problems], mostly with the Polish teacher, because whenever the internet didn't work properly for us, because a few people at home use the internet and we'd get kicked out of lessons sometimes and come back in after 2 or 3 minutes, she just shouted at us that we were leaving the lesson, that we weren't listening during the lesson, or simply when someone's microphone wasn't working, it got stuck and he spoke up after 5 minutes, because he'd fixed it, she accused us making everything up and that it wasn't how we said, and there were such arguments.

I: And it was on Polish language, and other teachers?

CH: Well, it really depended, but for example the maths teacher was more calm and said: well, you fix it, then you'll tell me when you'll fix it, or well, when you come to class you'll let me know, and so on. The same with the biology teacher, well most teachers are calm. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

Participation in classes was also difficult due to children's unwillingness to use webcams. As there was no regulation forcing them to switch them on, almost all decided not to. On the one hand, it gave them some privacy as they did not feel that their homes or family members are monitored. On the other, it also reveals an issue of mistrust between teacher and pupils, a need to control everything by a teacher and false accusations of not being prepared. All these factors can lead to potential conflicts with a teacher.

CH: (...) there was a problem with the camera and with the microphone, I couldn't turn the microphone on. And it wasn't on purpose, [it wasn't that] I didn't learn, right? Well, I just couldn't, I pressed the microphone and it didn't switch on, and, well, it did, and I was talking, and I couldn't be heard.

I: So something was broken, right?

CH: Yes, and everyone said that I did it on purpose, because I wasn't prepared, and I wrote in the chat, what a teacher asked me about, and I answered. (PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

Although the interviewed children did not abuse teacher's confidence, they also reported that it might have been the case that some children only turned on their computers and were not present as they did not even react on chat:

We can have the webcam on. In general, it happens that someone doesn't have such a webcam and he/she didn't turn it on and you couldn't hear him/her at all and when a teacher asked him/her, he/she didn't speak or even wrote in the chat that he/she couldn't hear or couldn't say anything. (PL\_I18\_CH\_G)

The most critical opinions presented by the children concern the negative impact of remote teaching on the quality of classes and the opportunities to learn. Children complained about difficulties in maintaining good contact with teachers: limited possibilities to ask for help and additional explanation, limited possibilities to use audio-visual materials and more engaging teaching methods. It should be emphasized, however, that teachers became more professional in using online teaching software and the situation of not knowing how to use it only happened sporadically.

During remote teaching, it was not easy even for teachers. For example, the geography teacher often writes notes on the blackboard, shows some videos, and she couldn't do it on the remote one, because the videos simply didn't show and it [videos] were delayed. Well, during regular teaching, (...) you can understand more, approach [a teacher], ask. (PL-I4-CH\_G)



Exactly when you're trying to learn something it's a bit more difficult. Because when you're with a teacher in one room, you can ask questions and it's just easier.

And here [during remote teaching] you couldn't ask questions. (...) Well you could ask, but it was just perceived a bit differently. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

I preferred it in the classroom, it [remote teaching] was a bit strange, and there were moments when I didn't understand what a teacher was explaining, and when I raised my hand, a teacher couldn't pay attention to it because of the noise. (PL\_I16\_CH\_B)

One child also complained about teachers not taking online teaching seriously and even accused them of not being prepared.

At my friend's, the gym teacher always asked the kids to come up with exercises, and he would switch off and do nothing himself. So the teachers also sometimes cheated during those lessons. (PL\_I7\_CH\_B)

Children complained about limited visual contact as webcams had been turned off or the appearance of teacher in a small window, the result of which was a failure to notice their non-verbal signals (such as raising their hand). Moreover, it was not always possible to hear what the teacher was saying.

CH: I like learning from home, but I have problems with it.

I: What kind of problems?

CH: Well, I can't hear [in the online teaching]. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

The online teaching hindered also children's educational development. For migrant children, it meant a lack of opportunities to speak Polish. They complained that they could only use it during classes and they did not have many opportunities to practice it in other contexts.

I: How did this online school look from your perspective?

CH: Not good. I didn't speak much Polish, because there was no one to speak to, there were no friends, well [they were] only in those lessons [online] and that's all. (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Further, some children did not keep up to date with their homework and they quickly lagged behind other pupils. Such an approach can be explained by several factors. Children could not easily explain a problem which they did not understand and they frequently did not know what they were supposed to do exactly. They found online teaching an additional barrier in communication, they could not express themselves or provide a proper explanation of a problem:

Well, for sure it is more difficult to focus, it's harder to learn, because if, for example, you don't understand something, it's difficult to explain through online communication. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

But it was so idiotic that they wrote in the diary that you had to solve this, solve that, and it was very difficult, because I didn't understand anything from that. And I had to do this. (PL\_I19\_CH\_G)

One of the main challenges was thus a lack of proper support from the teacher's side. Children felt that they were burdened with responsibilities for making up after being absent or for looking for explanations. They rather talked about non-institutional support from their siblings, friends from class and parents or simply used Internet resources. Only a few children in a big city talked about help from teachers, which was usually either requested by a pupil or his/her parents. While the former included support in tasks such as preparing projects, the latter referred to parents' request to adjust the time for an exam to the skills of migrant children. A teacher's support was easier to obtain for children from schools located close to the centre for foreigners as they were supported by a teacher coming to the centre. Such help was rarely offered in big cities:



## Child-Up

Actually, it was not so hard, because I have my assistant with me. So like during (ns - 00:10:42) while I would have my computer on with me (...), I would just have my phone on a video call on WhatsApp. So it was easier for me. Like it was easy for me. It was not so hard. (PL\_I22\_CH\_G)

The lack of social interactions was highlighted by many children. The Covid-19 pandemic took away one of the main non-educational functions of school – social life, depriving children of shared activities between lessons.

I missed my classmates. And teachers too. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

During breaks, you could only either play on the computer for the whole break or chat. It's better at school. Because you can go out in the corridor, play a ball, a small one, a soft one, that won't do anything. (...) This is better. (PL\_I8\_CH\_B)

Spending most of their time on online teaching, with only short breaks to switch between lessons, and isolation from social contacts lowered the children's ability to concentrate, actively participate in lessons and discouraged them from undertaking after-school activities.

CH: Well, what bothered me the most was just laziness, because if you just sit at home, you don't have that much energy to do something and so on, you just sit at the computer for a few hours and you just don't want to do anything and...

I: Do you feel fatigue?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

This feeling of being tired or sleepy also showed up in the focus group in which we used visual materials. One of the boys chose the image of sheep lingering by a road to illustrate how fast the lesson was (symbolized by the road), and how sleepy he was during classes (symbolized by the sheep). (PL\_F6\_CH)



Children also noted some positive aspects of online teaching. They appreciated that they could use the dictionary more easily to check the meaning of words or sentences or in case of not being prepared – they could quickly go through their notes.

I: But on the other hand, you're talking about the fact that you could ask someone to help you and if you miss something, it's easier during the online teaching?



## Child-Up

CH: Yes, well, tests, also papers are easier to write at home, that you can translate for example from the phone, you can see somewhere in the textbook, and you can't do it here.

I: Do you use a dictionary during lessons?

CH: Well, I did, when we were writing the tests in September, but a teacher saw that it would take a long time, that I would look up 1 word, more time, and therefore I wouldn't write the test.

I: So you didn't use it in the end?

- Yes. (PL\_I1\_CH\_G)

If you haven't taught something and the teacher says she's going to ask now, you can quickly see something in the notebook and during the offline classes a teacher sees it all. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

Children also noted that some teachers put more effort into preparing their lessons. They produced additional resources available to pupils: presentations, short movies, documents with additional information. But it was impossible to do all of the planned activities - e.g. they could not to some experiments on chemistry.

During online learning, the teachers often made presentations on the topic, they often prepared additional documents with notes in Word files. The geography teacher made presentations, notes in Word, and videos. The physics teacher made presentations at the beginning, then in a document (...) with notes, a teacher explained everything. Later on there were still some videos. I think that there was a video, a presentation, a Word document in every lesson, there was a lot of that. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

Some children emphasized a relaxing and calm atmosphere during online teaching, which helped them to focus better on the lesson. Others, on the contrary, found online teaching chaotic, noisy and more challenging.

Online teaching also meant time being saved by children – which was also presented as an advantage. Children appreciated the fact that they did not have to travel to school: they just simply got up and were ready for their lessons. Attending lessons was as easy as never before: one could move to the class only by clicking.

For now, it's that you can wake up 5 minutes literally before the lesson, turn on and be already there. You can also sleep sometimes, just during a break let's say. (PL\_I23\_CH\_G)

### Extra-curricular activities

The Covid-19 pandemic affected children's after-class activities and leisure time. Throughout the lockdown, the restrictions of social distancing, self-isolation and limited access to public spaces negatively impacted the possibilities to organize extra-curricular activities. During any period of quarantine, schools did not offer any additional activities either offline or online. Some activities were restored when strict regulations were no longer in force. These included, for example, training sessions or one-off contests outside school. As a result, the children's daily practices continued to reflect their daily routine before the pandemic to some extent.

### Relation with friends and family

To better understand the relationships between pupils during the pandemic, it is necessary to take a broader context into account. Firstly, the interviews with children in Lesser Poland and in the school located close to the centre for foreigners were done at different times, but in both cases they were conducted after the strict lockdown had ended, when social distancing was loosened. This change of regulations is reflected in the experiences of children: "During the first wave of the pandemic, only at the

beginning, we met less often, there were two or three times we managed to meet, and then we met more and more often” (PL\_I10\_CH\_G).

As the regulations related to Covid-19 were more restrictive for children living in the centre for foreigners, their relations with friends were negatively affected to much greater extent than children living in a big city or small communities. During the time of pandemic they suffered from a lack of face-to-face contact: they had only online contact with their friends as they were not allowed to leave the centre.

Both interviews and press reports suggest that at a time when free movement has been restricted due to the pandemic, opportunities to spend time with schoolmates outside of school were heavily modified and narrowed to the closest environment. Due to the pandemic, children could neither go outside with their peers or spend time with them at home. Their social contacts were often limited to only the closest relatives.

I: Did you hang out with your friends during this pandemic, did you go out?

CH: No. (...) I only went out with my family. (PL\_I19\_CH\_B)

Especially children at the ISCED 2 level felt isolated since they spent almost the whole school year (from November to July) at home learning remotely. Moreover, children under 16 were not allowed to be outside by themselves between 8 AM and 4 PM, significantly restricting their freedom of movement and potential to meet up with friends. Children felt disconnected from their friends and closed in their homes. During the focus interview, one of the girls illustrated this with the image of a person trapped inside a diamond, which symbolized the way she felt during the period of remote teaching (PL\_F6\_CH).



Other children talked about meeting in small groups or only with their best friend(s) which is also partially substituted by online communication (via videoconferences or chats). A consequence of this may be more frequently spending time with friends from one's own community than outside of it (a large proportion of the interviewees arrived in Poland recently, some during the pandemic, so perhaps relationships with the wider community have not yet been built).

I: What was it like with your colleagues, did you go out?

CH: With..., just met with the Ukrainians.

I: Colleagues, yeah? Did they come to your house? Or did you meet rather in the yard?

CH: Well, they used to come to..., well, to the house, to the yard sometimes. (PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

I: Yes, but when there was a lock down, when there was a pandemic, did you leave the house to talk to your friends?

CH: We used to meet around the house. (PL\_I18\_CH\_G)



However, there were also more spontaneous, unplanned meetings: children just knew that others would be in the playground and so they went there after their classes. Difficulties with meeting children who lived outside the city is an important factor limiting the social contacts between children.

On the positive side, the Covid-19 pandemic was also a time which saw the development of new friendships:

CH: Well, I came to classes with [name of a teacher] and one day I started discussing the test with Lew. Well, he helped me, I helped him, and [name of the intercultural assistant] thought about it and said, why do not do it... (...) And that's how we became friends.  
(PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Good relations with friends are also important in a context of online teaching. Children mentioned that they could ask for help if they did not understand something during online class, that they exchanged their notes: "When I didn't understand something in lesson, I would call Gabriel, he would tell me everything and give me homework" (PL\_I17\_CH\_B).

However, difficult situations and conflicts occurred. Children did not always respond to the questions posed by other pupils in the online communicator or their responses and joint assessment came too late. Such breakdowns in communication resulted in pupils being unprepared for the classes.

Well, only when I write to them [other pupils], they just don't reply. I write to our whole group, I ask about the assignment, for example, when I wasn't at school, I write what was on the assignment, they don't answer. I come the following day, I say that I don't have an assignment, because they don't answer me, and a teacher say, I don't care. And it's like that all the time, a teacher says to everyone, it doesn't matter to me. For example, when you don't know what the assignment was, she says, I don't care because you had to find out. And what if you write to someone and they don't answer you, what should you do? (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

## 4. Intercultural relationships at school

Research on intercultural relationships in school indicates that the term interculturalism itself is defined in different ways, which can make it difficult to understand the dynamics of experiences in school. We assume, following other researchers, that the notion of interculturalism cannot be treated as fixed or permanent; rather, it should highlight the dynamic aspect of different cultures (Hajisoteriou, Karousiou, and Angelides 2020). Making such an assumption leads to the rejection of a normative vision of intercultural relations. Instead, an understanding of interculturalism in school is proposed through concepts such as empathy, interaction, exchange and hybridity. It also draws attention to the three level construction of interculturalism at school: at the macro, meso and micro levels. The first of these includes an education that emphasizes the multiplicity of cultures and transnationalism in a global world and promotes intercultural solidarity. The meso level draws attention to the need to combat social inequalities and to rebuild social ties between different communities with different cultural capital. The micro level, on the other hand, refers to working on prejudice, stereotypes and xenophobia at school (Bleszynska 2008). Taking these considerations as a starting point, in this chapter we look at intercultural relations at school, focusing on selected themes emerging from interviews with students with a migrant background. We will present both peer relations, including conflict situations, and show educational practices at school which highlight interculturalism.

### Peer relationships

The school as seen by pupils varies according to their individual experiences. Migrant children at schools in a big city most often describe their school experience through the prism of the homogeneity of the school, broken down by the presence of individual migrant children. They clearly identify their Polish classmates and those from their country of origin or from another country. Sometimes, this vision of the school is



perceived as closed and unfriendly for newcomers, something exacerbated by the language barrier. The following quotes clearly indicate that language barriers maintain the homogeneity and closedness of the school and make it difficult for students to develop interactions with others from the school.

I: Well, and tell me, and in the school itself, how many of your classmates do you have who are from the Ukraine, or Belarus, or Vietnam, you know, from where, the UK, or something like that, are there any?

CH: Well, three of them are from Ukraine, four from Poland and everything.

I: Do you like each other? And who do you like more, the Polish or the Ukrainian?

CH: From Ukraine, because they understand me.

I: Oh, you talk to each other, yes. Do you hang out after school, too? Do you do something together?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

Importantly, however, peer relationships tended to form across this divide. This means that migrant children develop friendships over time with both children with a migrant background and those without. When we look at how pupils talk about school and relationships within the school, homogeneity can be broken down by frequent intercultural interactions.

I: And here you have any colleagues, friends?

CH: Yes, I have Polish friends, Krzyś and Dariusz. And I have a colleague, a friend from Ukraine. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

At this point it is worth noting the specificity of schools with migrant children. Usually there are several pupils with a migrant background in one school, and only one or two migrant children attend the same classes. Such dispersion means that, in many situations, for newly arrived children, pupils with a migration background attending a particular school become a kind of “guide” to life and relationships in the school, showing the functioning of the building and the rules of the school.

I: And in your lessons, for example, what was helpful to you in the beginning?

CH: That's another one, secondly a friend... Also from Ukraine, she helped me very well. She helped to explain.

[INTERCULTURAL ASSISTANT: She was always helping him so he wouldn't write something down or forget something and she always told him what he needed.

I: And Valentina has been here longer?

CH: A year and a half.

I: So a little longer than you.

CH: Yes. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

CH: Maybe if there hadn't been a pandemic, maybe I would have hung out with others, and yes, no, just from Ukraine with a friend.

I: And did she arrive long ago?

CH: She's a sixth grader from the middle.

I: So it was a little earlier, right?

CH: Yes.

I: So she could be a little bit, she's already been through this one herself, too, so she could be a little bit of support for you?

CH: Yes.



## Child-Up

I: She knew where what was. And you sat in the pew with her?

CH: Yes.

I: And you sat in the classroom desk with her from the beginning too?

CH: No, from the beginning I sat with my friend and she sat with her brother and then he said he wanted to sit with his friends from Poland and I told our teacher I wanted to sit with her. (PL\_I1\_CH\_G)

Relationships at school also translate into experiences outside of school. Students in a big city most often indicated that they met friends from their country of origin outside of school, slightly less often with students from Poland. However, this theme should be approached with some caution due to the Covid-19 pandemic as indicated in the previous section.

The role of peers from a migrant background also includes helping out in class, translating the teacher's instructions, explaining what has been learnt, explaining misunderstood vocabulary. However, in many situations pupils without migrant background also play a similar role and act as helpers in school and learning. It is worth noting that besides the supportive dimension, such guidance also deepens the interaction between the pupils and strengthens the children's agency and subjectivity. Importantly, however, the role of "helpers" is also played by pupils without migration experience - classmates.

I: And how do you need help because, for example, you were sick and you weren't in class, or...?

CH: I write to my friends to tell them what the subject was in class, what they talked about and then if it wasn't a difficult subject I could understand it myself, if it was difficult I could go to my mum and ask her to understand everything.

I: She explained something too, didn't she?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I1\_CH\_G)

The key factor in building peer relationships most frequently turns out to be the students' common interests. Students mention school-organised projects or activities less frequently in this context, indicating a largely spontaneous dimension to their interactions.

I: And how many colleagues, friends do you have in your class?

CH: All of them.

I: Everyone in the class. And is there anyone who you communicate with better, in general, you communicate best, you have common themes, who is, thinks like you, you can count on? Then how many people is that in the class?

CH: Two.

I: And it's both a boy and a girl, right?

CH: Two boys.

I: Oh, two boys. And who's your best friend? Just them, those two boys?

CH: Yes.

I: And are these boys from Poland or are these boys...

CH: They are from Poland.

I: From Poland, and why are they such best friends?

CH: Because when I was in that class, that sixth grade class I was in, they immediately said come on, let's play something, come on, let's play something, and then tomorrow it was like that too, they helped, they helped everybody. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)



CH: We mix, but for the most part we spend our time in those groups where we feel most comfortable simply.

I: And what makes you feel comfortable in such groups?

CH: We just feel better in their company maybe.

I: And what else do you have in common.

CH: Interests. (PL\_F5\_CH)

Because we have such funny people here who are, to put it ugly, stupid sometimes a bit in is but sometimes you can laugh with them. (PL\_F5\_CH)

It sometimes happens that friendships are formed within the divide outlined at the beginning between children without and with a migrant background. But importantly, for the pupils themselves this is not a problem. They also do not feel bad when their group of friends is given a name that reflects their migration experience, e.g. “internationals” or “Ukrainians”. The creation of peer relationships reveals the agency of children, who emphasise that they stick with those who share their interests or who are close, helpful and funny to them, for example.

CH: Yeah, actually I don't know. We probably have about 4 groups or 3.

I: What causes that? What did they emerge from in the class based on?

CH: One group is boys, half the boys. The other group is three boys and probably the same with girls, I don't know. The so-called internationals, that is Ruslan, Sergey and Oleg also form such a small pack. And they just stick closest to each other.

I: Where did the term internationals even come from?

CH: My mum says so, but I've also heard it before.

CH: It's just an English name.

I: But do you call yourselves that or do they call you that?

CH: Max called it that.

I: You made it up?

CH: No, I didn't invent it, it's worked before. It's just the way they talk at other schools. At least my colleagues say it to their colleagues from abroad.

I: But you have used this term before?

CH: I did.

CH: I used the term Ukrainians. Although I am not from Ukraine.

I: Is it your group you use it like that or to someone else?

CH: Well, to us, yes. Because everyone somehow got used to the fact that it's rather Ukrainians who come to Poland. For example, our art teacher often calls us Ukrainians. I don't find it offensive.

CH: I don't care, honestly.

CH: But you are Ukrainian, so...

CH: But if someone says Russian, for example.

I: Have you been in this class from the beginning?

CH: I moved here in the middle of the year, Roman studied in a Ukrainian school for 2 months, I studied here for a year.

I: So you've only been together in this school here since this year?



CH: No, I've been here since the second year, Ruslan since the first year. (PL\_F5\_CH)

For some children, language is a barrier to forming relationships with peers. Due to a lack of competence in the language of the host country, children are more likely to form closer relationships with other pupils who speak their language. This allows them to express themselves more widely and talk about a variety of topics. This also shows that it is important for pupils to find a way of communication in which they feel comfortable.

Well, you can't say that I talk to all the girls there, I don't contact them that often, maybe in my class group, there at school I talk something, I talk more with girls who can speak my language. In my class we also have a girl from Belarus, I often contact her, I talk to her. Well, I think she is a very good friend, but for now she is only one who speaks the same language as me. We can talk about various topics, and I don't know everything in Polish yet. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

Other students emphasised that speaking freely in a language they know and like is so important to them that they build their relationships transnationally by using available instant messaging and online communication methods. This, too, can be interpreted in terms of children's agency, as they take action themselves to fulfil their affective and social needs. However, this transnational dimension usually occurs outside the strictly school context.

I: Do you have any friends from Belarus or other countries?

CH: I have friends from Russia. I talk to them on Discord.

I: In what language?

CH: In Russian.

I: Do you speak Russian well?

CH: Yes, I know.

I: What does talking to them in Russian like that get you?

CH: I like talking to them because I only speak Russian at home, when I go out I only speak Polish, so I like talking to them because Russian is my favourite language you could say.

I: Do you mainly speak Russian at home?

CH: Yes, we speak Russian. (PL\_I19\_CH\_G)

The experiences of children attending schools located close to centres for foreigners are slightly different. Here, the presence of refugee and migrant children is part of the everyday landscape of the school. In terms of class size, there are far more children with a migrant background, which contributes to a more heterogeneous school picture. The interactions between pupils transcend the "us" and "them" divisions. During focus interviews, children pointed out that their countries of origin are often the focus of attention from their peers.

They would ask and ask for different words, like would be good morning, in Russian or Chechen. (PL\_F2\_CH)

Once in Polish we had a topic, the teacher told me to talk about my country and religion and one boy from my class said "I want that too". (PL\_F4\_CH)

The refugee children often emphasized the good and happy atmosphere at school, even if there are conflicts, they consider them as part of the school experience. Although in the past there were, according to them, situations where they felt isolated from the rest of their peers or treated unfairly at school, today they more often describe school through the prism of positive intercultural interactions. Only a few



children pointed out the problem of lack of friends or creating a group of friends only within their own national group (Chechen).

### Conflicts

Although the students mentioned the openness of schools to their presence and the friendships formed between peers at school, their stories also show that Polish schools are not free of prejudice. In the interviews, there were situations which mentioned bullying, teasing and harassment. Sometimes children referred to situations when the curiosity of children towards the new migrant pupils took the form of malicious and mean comments. Sometimes the children felt harassed on the grounds of their ethnicity by peers in class.

I: And surely it happened somehow that everything was great in relation to you. Did something maybe hurt you once, someone, something said?

CH: Well, sometimes, well, before, when I just came to this new class, everybody asked me questions, because I had my name written in English and everybody asked me what my real name was and why I had it written like that. And they were just terribly interested in it, well sometimes they laughed a bit, they made some jokes about it, but...

I: But who does it more often, boys or girls?

CH: Well, there was just one girl who laughed at it more, and I think it was the boys who approached it that way.

CH: Why do you think this girl asked where you were from? Did she ask why you came or not?

CH: Well, she didn't ask; I don't even know why she asked, but she just wanted to have a laugh and that was it.

I: And she's Polish, right?

CH: Yes.

I: But what do you think her reasons were?

CH: I don't know, maybe a new person in the class and she wanted to know as much as possible about this person, maybe just a new person. They never had such a person, just from abroad.

I: And do you like her, or are you more like...?

CH: Well, we're not really friends or colleagues, but well yeah, to argue, then no, well it's ok. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

The children were very skilled at capturing situations in which their peers displayed verbal violence. Many of them referred to the migrant children's background.

CH: with my classmates I had that problem a little bit. But now everything is fine.

I: Tell me what it was. Tell.

CH: Well, one boy...

I: A Pole.

CH: A Pole, yeah. Oh, he said Ukrainians are shit, well, something like that. Well, it's all right now, so that. (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

I: Has anyone been treated unkindly at your school because they are from another country?

CH: In my school there was such a thing. I was in the first class, when we played war with the older boy. I hit him on the head with a toy block and he took revenge on me in the second class. (PL\_I13\_CH\_B)



In conflict situations, however, students show a clear proficiency in resolving these situations. Most often they share information about the problem with their parents and teachers. In this way they show that they trust the teaching staff and that they are confident that they will be on their side.

I: Have you had situations where you or someone else was treated worse?

CH: I don't know if I was, because almost nobody liked me, because I'm from another country.

I: Was it like that or is it like that all the time?

CH: I don't know if it's like that all the time now because we're remote, but it was when we were in school.

I: How can you help in these situations?

CH: I don't know, because we're about to finish eighth grade and everyone's going to different schools, so there's no time to do anything anymore.

I: And for your younger siblings or for someone else, what could you do in that situation?

CH: You have to reach out to teachers and say that.

I: You didn't ask?

CH: No.

I: Why?

CH: I told my parents that when something important like that happened.

I: And what did the parents do then?

CH: Once my mom went to my teacher and said there were two girls there teasing me.

I: And they teased you in what way?

CH: I don't know, they just said something to me, I don't remember anymore, it was in that class.

I: And that helped?

CH: Not so much, they keep teasing me, saying something. (PL\_I19\_CH\_G)

Sometimes they also resolve these conflicts on their own by choosing to talk to or cut off contact with the conflicting person, for example.

I: And tell me, try to remember now, because it's been five years since you've been in Poland, have there ever been any disagreements or conflicts between pupils in your class?

CH: That beating?

I: Conflict. It could be some kind of unpleasant conversation or you disagreed with something, not necessarily a beating right away.

CH: No.

I: And the fight came up?

CH: A fight is when someone my best friend accosts, I go and help.

I: Oh, so you're helping him in a fight, right?

CH: Yes.

I: And that happens a lot?

CH: Not often, no, not often.

I: Not often. But you help your best friend, the one from Poland, right?



## Child-Up

CH: Yes.

I: But is he the one who gets into some conflicting situations or did that just happen sometimes?

CH: Sometimes it happened, at school there are, well, I saw two boys bad, who accost everybody. And these two boys were accosting my...

I: A colleague, yes?

CH: They accosted my friend, then I went, I said you can't fight, you have to walk together, help each other, and they went away and we went to school.

I: So you didn't fight, but resolved the conflict through conversation, yes?

CH: Yes. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

In cases of discrimination from peers on the ethnic grounds, migrant children who have Polish friends turn to them for help.

I: Has there been any situation that has made you feel bad?

CH: I also have friends from the second grade, and I had a bit of a fight with them.

I: Why?

CH: I don't remember how it started, they were the ones who started talking to me.

I: Did they say anything bad?

CH: Well, a bit bad. So, I didn't pay attention to them, I went to my class; it was sad when they said that and that's why I didn't want to make trouble or something.

I: Did it happen often?

CH: It only happened once.

I: In some way, did someone help you with this?

CH: I have a Polish colleague who came up to me and asked why you were so sad, I told him that a pupil from another class had told me such and such so this colleague came up to them and said that nothing unpleasant could be said there, because he doesn't speak Polish. (PL\_I27\_CH\_B)

It is worth noting that students sometimes do not want to share information about the conflict with teachers. They prefer to deal with it on their own. They are afraid that their difficulties will be trivialized, lumped together with other minor situations at school.

I: Did you tell the teacher how you had these enemies?

CH: No, I didn't, I didn't tell her not to tell me that we had any problems, well they have their problems, a lot of kids have their problems, that's where someone insults them, that boy, I just hate him too, I can't hold on. We play tag with him there, for example, he just comes up and beats me in the back. He just comes up and beats me in the back.

I: To other children is he like that too?

CH: Well, to all of them, to some even more is bad. (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

## Intercultural practices

The interviews also asked about different intercultural practices that are implemented in the school. Among other things, students emphasised the importance of situations in which they could tell something about themselves to the whole class. Most often such situations were initiated by teachers. Usually the request to tell something about oneself, about the school one attended before, about one's country of



origin, was positively evaluated by the pupils and seen as an opportunity to express oneself and to gain visibility in the class.

At the beginning of the year, when we came to class, the class teacher gathered the class, we sat like that in a circle and talked. They introduced us as new students and asked us to tell them about ourselves, our country, there school that was. We said that in Ukraine there were more subjects at school, I remember this, I told them something about myself, but not that much, I think, it was more interesting about another country. I agree, for example if someone from another country came to our class in Ukraine, we also asked about it. Well, there was one hour. Then, somehow, during the WC, also similar to what you do as a formative hour, we simply talk to the class. Well, now we had career counselling, we don't have it anymore, but it was like that for half a year, in the first semester, that we talked, we said something about ourselves. But everyone said something about themselves, you used to stop us, ask how the language was. Then another new pupil appeared, already this year. The first one was from Belarus, but I don't remember, she told something about herself during the lessons, because everyone understood something about her from the conversation. And the new pupil was already a Pole from another city, I think during the JD lesson. For him, the ladies asked us to tell something about ourselves, because he didn't know we were from Ukraine. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

CH: Actually, first I came to this school I met with my classmates and they prepared like... How do you say it? Flashcards. So like cards, so in English for me, 'How are you?' 'How are you?', numbers. So it was like... They were very welcoming to me. So yes. (PL\_I22\_CH\_G)

Few students mentioned that they did not have the opportunity to talk about their country of origin and culture. Sometimes they stressed that nobody was interested in such information. This situation occurred more often in the context of schools where there were more migrant children.

I: And do you tell your classmates anything about Chechnya at school?

CH: No.

I: They're not interested in it at all? They don't ask? And do you remember Chechnya?

CH: Mhm. [contradiction]. (PL\_I25\_CH\_G)

I: And for example, were the children in your class curious about the place you came from when you came here? Did they ask you anything about Belarus?

CH: No. (PL\_I5\_CH\_G)

Although the interviews with teachers (especially those working near the Centre for Foreigners) show that schools often organise various projects and undertake activities aimed at exchanging information about different cultures, from the children's perspective, these events are not particularly important - they are rarely mentioned. They more often talk about situations which in their opinion occur spontaneously between students and/or teaching staff.

In the collected interviews, the use of mother tongue at school also appeared. Students point out that sometimes it is required to use mainly Polish during breaks or at play, which is supposed to make it easier for students to acquire the language. This shows that Polish schools are still closer to an assimilation model than to a hybrid model, one open to linguistic and cultural diversity.

CH: We came, there they went to one such room at the end of the corridor. There was another girl there from Ukraine as well, who then me and Ilja, my brother still, to speak only Polish, but we couldn't speak Polish. So they tried something. And then they told us that we really only had to speak Polish, or learn it first, even during the breaks they asked us to do this.

I: Teachers?



CH: No, not the teachers, but they did.

I: Who asked?

CH: I don't remember. It wasn't a ban on speaking in your own language, it wasn't a ban at all, it was just advice to make it easier to speak. Well, later we still spoke Russian with that friend, she understood that I didn't know Polish, so she showed me everything here. She showed me the library. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

An important practice for shaping the intercultural dimension of education at school is the engagement of intercultural assistants. Most pupils were positive about the presence of such assistants, indicating not only help with language and with understanding a culture new to them, but also a feeling of being “looked after” at school. The latter enabled the pupils to find their way in the Polish school and build up interactions within the class.

So teachers are nice. They school got me an assistant. So it like made the joining this school easier and I am doing perfectly well with everyone else in this school. They are nice to me. Yeah. (PL\_I22\_CH\_G)

CH: The most fortunate thing is that we have Mr. Sergio.

I: He's your cultural assistant?

CH: You could say that.

I: And what does Mr. Sergei do?

CH: We read books with him. To everyone, everyone. (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

## 5. Identity and belonging

In the interviews with the children, there were no direct statements indicating a sense of belonging or providing an answer to the identity question: Who am I? It can be indirectly concluded from the statements that the children are hung between two worlds and are in the process of forming a hybrid identity. This is facilitated by the fact that most parents try to maintain communication at home in both the language of origin and the traditions of the country of origin either through cuisine or through religious traditions (e.g. in the case of Muslim children). However, as the process of identity formation takes place during adolescence (10/12-18/20 years), it is difficult to talk about a formed identity in the case of the children in our study. Rather, we can discuss experiences consisting of behaviours, emotions, or perception of reality that are related to the process of hybrid identity formation. These experiences concern emotions related to the country of origin, language, and family practices.

### Emotions related to the country of origin

When children talk about their country of origin, they frequently referred to lost relationships with both family members - grandmothers, grandfathers, but also with friends. Feelings of nostalgia, a sense of loss and missing can be identified in these statements.

I: And do you like living here at all?

CH: Not so much.

I: And what is it that you don't like, that is difficult?

CH: Well, I don't have many friends. And that' all. (PL\_I5\_CH\_B)

I: You said you miss your friends from Ukraine.

CH: Well I miss them, but not all of them, only five people.

I: Tell me something about them...



## Child-Up

CH: They were my classmates, three boys, two girls, they are my kind of little family. (PL\_I15\_CH\_B)

CH: I would like to go back to my grandparents, to my grandmother, to visit them, or they would come here. (PL\_I27\_CH\_B)

CH: [I miss] my friends and the fact that I understand everything. And for the twelfth-graders [highest grade in Ukraine].

I: And do you remember when you said that you always walked from morning to evening on the street?

CH: When it was summer vacation, I would go from 6:00 in the morning to 9:00 in the evening playing with everybody. (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Children also keep in touch with friends in their home country. Very often they had left there their best friends whom they miss very much. Children maintained relationships through communicators such as Viber, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp. Sometimes children also visit their friends or, when this is not possible, they play computer games together.

M: When you think of the school, this school in Ukraine, what do you recall? Or who?

CH: And also my friend Anastasia.

M: Did she go to class with you?

CH: Yes.

M: Did you share a desk together?

CH: Yes.

M: Do you keep in touch with this Anastasia? Can you write to her somehow, or through some messenger?

CH: Yes, through Instagram. (PL\_I6\_CH\_G)

M: Did you like going to school in Ukraine?

CH, boy, 11 years old, a migrant from Ukraine: Yes, it was very nice. (...)

M: Did you have friends there?

CH: Yes.

M: Do you still remember them?

CH: Mhm. My friends and I played computer games every day.

M: The kind online that you connect to?

CH: Mhm.

M: What do you play?

CH: Well, a game like that, Counter Strike. (...)

M: Do you talk, apart from playing?

CH: Yeah, we talk. I mean, we always talk. (PL\_I7\_CH\_B)

M: Do you have any friends in Belarus?

CH: My friends are Maksim, my second and Staś. They're my good friends.

M: Well, it's nice to have a friend, not a colleague, but a friend of his.

CH: And now I'm writing text messages on the computer. We tell each other things.

M: But when you come [to Belarus], you will probably be able to see each other?



CH: Yes. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

In a few cases, the children of economic migrants managed to meet with family and friends during either holiday trips or when friends or family members visited them in Poland. However, this type of activity was significantly limited due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

CH: Holiday, well we would like to go to grandma and grandpa in Ukraine. But there is a problem, that there is an epidemic. Well there is a problem with them and for sure that we can get infected. (PL\_I3\_CH\_B)

In the case of children from Belarus, conflict and the political situation made it even more difficult to travel, affecting children's opportunities and readiness to return to their home country.

The last but equally important obstacle mentioned by the children was the economic status of the family. As one of the girls admitted: "We don't know [if we will go]. The ticket is a lot. We need tickets, we need money and now it's a bit hard" (PL\_I14\_CH\_G).

On the other hand, when they talked about their country of origin as a place, there were statements indicating fear, or insecurity. Then they talked about Poland as a safe, clean, orderly country, where they would like to stay and plan their future.

CH: Here I like the streets, in Ukraine there were a lot of holes in the road, you couldn't go out there with your bike. Here is more...

I: Bicycle roads.

CH: Lots of it. Still the look of the streets is beautiful, the Old Town is...

I: Reconstructed.

CH: In Ukraine it was old, really old, it was scary to walk there. Well, I really like a lot being here. (PL\_I2\_CH\_B)

I: So if you had to choose, for example, whether here or in Belarus, where would you choose?

CH: In Belarus it's not good now, so...[here].(PL\_I16\_CH\_B)

Children talk about the differences between the two countries largely in aesthetic terms; nevertheless, these statements are largely related to the perception of Poland as a safe place. Direct statements pointing to a greater sense of security in Poland are made by children who have lived in places threatened by war.

CH: I lived in Iran, Iraq and Syria and there was a lot of war. And my dad and my mom thought that our future, there in Turkey will not be so good, because there was so much war, so much noise and so much fear. And they thought where to move to, and they thought of Poland, maybe they thought of Germany first, maybe no Germany, then they thought of Poland. And we went to Georgia, we lived there for two months. And from there we flew to Poland and we already decided that we would stay in Poland, and that's it. And we're not going to move anywhere else. And we'll stay in Poland all our lives. During vacations we'll also go somewhere, but we'll live in Poland till the end. (...) And I'd rather stay in Poland. (PL\_I26\_CH\_B)

Most children talk about Poland as a country where they would like to spend their future, although they often indicate that they will visit their country of origin and people from their family and Poland who are visiting them in Poland during vacations and trips.

I would rather stay in Poland, because Poland is such a nice country, very good, it is not so bad, not so unpleasant, it is a very good country. And I would also prefer to stay here in the future. If my opinion changes in the future, I don't know, but this summer and at this time I'd rather stay in Poland all the time, because I've also learned the language well. And



I've already known well how do they celebrate holidays and everything here. (PL\_I26\_CH\_B)

The children only talk about their country of origin in the context of school, more specifically classes where they talked about their language and the city they came from.

We tell our friends how Chechnya looked like, like our house. For example, my house was built by my father together with his brothers. There was a place where we could climb on the roof. It was very cool there, you could see all the stars. (PL\_F1\_CH)

The statements indicating that children talk about their own experiences with people from their country of origin can be inferred indirectly from statements indicating that children understand each other best with children who speak their language. Some children try to adapt, to integrate into the group, but they do not manage to do so because of language reasons.

I: And tell me, during the break at school, do you speak Russian with your friends or Polish?

CH: In Russian and in Polish, because, well, my classmates don't understand Polish. (PL\_I20\_CH\_B)

I: And why do you stick together, people from abroad?

CH: Language.

I: Is that when you communicate in another language during school?

CH: Sometimes yes.

I: And what is the reason for this?

CH: It's easier and it's just more fun when everyone stares at us and doesn't understand us. Nobody understands us and we talk about whatever we want. (PL\_F5\_CH)

This theme is further described in the section on peer relations.

### Language aspects

As already mentioned, most children do not speak Polish before coming to Poland, which is the greatest barrier at the beginning of their stay in Poland. Children rarely have the chance to prepare for the change of residence by learning Polish before their arrival in Poland. Those whose parents ensured that this took place ended up overcoming the language and culture barrier much faster.

I: Did you know Polish before your arrival, or did you learn it here?

CH: Well, I learned a little bit there, but also in kindergarten I started to learn more Polish when I talked to other people here. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

It can be noted that the lack of language proficiency not only manifests itself in educational difficulties but also as a barrier to communication with peers, meaning that children lack a sense of belonging in the peer group. In most cases, children treat language instrumentally, for communication purposes rather than for defining their own identity. Only one child directly referred to language as a tool to develop a hybrid or national Polish identity. This statement indicates that language can be a way to "be Polish" and develop a sense of belonging to a place.

CH: I like, I like Polish language, I like English the most, I like math and biology too.

I: And will you tell me why you like each one? Why do you like Polish?

CH: Because I want to learn Polish very well.

I: And why?



CH: Because when I talk to someone I either don't understand, or I ask, they'll say or yes, I want them to talk like a real Pole, I wish. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

They rather use Polish during classes at school and the language of their parents' origin at home. The moments when children use Polish outside the school context and the language of their parents' origin in the school context are important, as they indicate the voluntary use of these languages by the child. The frequency of use of these languages depends, among other things, on the time of stay in Poland, parents' attitude to learning a new language, and the country of origin of the children.

Many children in our group are from Ukraine. It is worth mentioning that children attending schools in Ukraine and Belarus are often bilingual. Depending on the region, Ukrainian children may speak Russian at home and Ukrainian at school or vice versa. In the case of children from Belarus, they usually speak Russian and sometimes Belarusian additionally at home. However, children emphasize that Ukrainian and Belarusian languages are similar to Polish, so they acquire them quite quickly. This is rather true for pupils who do not experience any developmental or learning difficulties.

We speak Russian in the family. At school and wherever we meet people we speak Polish. And in Ukrainian I'm starting to remember [forget], because Ukrainian is similar to Polish, so I put words from Polish in Ukrainian and if I came to Ukraine and had to speak only Ukrainian, there would be a lot of Polish words. Well, I haven't practiced this language, I haven't spoken it for a year. In my family only mom knows Ukrainian, papa doesn't, that's why Russian comes first, that's what we speak. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

The length of stay in Poland is also important. The longer the time of stay in Poland, the safer children feel in communicating in Polish, and also, in the school environment itself. Children who have been in Poland for a shorter period of time, for example one year, often still experience difficulties.

CH: Yes, I installed such an application on my phone where this, Polish letters, alphabet, I learned it, then I learned numbers through a translator, then words, because I had extra Polish classes.

CH: And do you sometimes have any difficulties with expressing yourself?

I: Well, I have difficulties with difficult words. With writing well and very well, I understand very well.

I: And at home, what language do you speak when you come home from school, from work, your parents?

CH: In Russian. (PL\_I11\_CH\_B)

Most of the children participating in the study, regardless of their country of origin or type of migration (voluntary or forced), tend to speak their parents' language at home, and the Polish language mainly features at school and in contact with their Polish peers. The shorter the period that the family has been in Poland, the more motivated they sometimes are to learn Polish. If parents have the resources to support their children and actively motivate them to learn Polish, then at home the family undertakes joint practices to acquire Polish. Often during the language learning stage children watch movies and read Polish books.

My father often said we watched some videos about Polish language to learn more and thanks to that I know a lot already. For example grammar, how to use the word "to be" I learned thanks to those videos and now I know it well, I've learned it for life. Well, everyone helped each other. (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

However, in many homes, even though parents try to speak their language of origin to their child, for example, one of the children stops speaking the language of origin of his/her parents because he/she is so immersed in the new culture. This often happens to younger siblings who were either born in Poland or came to Poland at a young age.



CH: I speak Polish with their sister, sometimes Polish with mom and dad, and brother in his own language [Tajik]. Well, but my sister only speaks Russian, Polish, not our language.

I: And you don't speak Tajik?

CH: No, she speaks Polish and Russian. She was born in Tajikistan and we came here, and she was very small. And then she went to kindergarten. (PL\_I24\_CH\_B)

The use of the language of origin at home not only to communicate with parents but also to spend leisure time watching movies often appears in the statements of children from schools attached to refugee centres, most often from Chechnya, who speak Russian or Chechen at home. Often the children support their parents by acting as interpreters in these families.

CH: At home we speak Chechen and Russian and Polish when we need to explain something to parents. (PL\_F4\_CH)

CH: I watch videos in Polish to understand something and for the rest I watch them in Russian. (PL\_F4\_CH)

Over time, the children develop a kind of flexibility, a fluency in multiple languages, which may be a manifestation of hybrid identity development. Language is a tool for moving between social contexts and also, over time, when the family feels secure, a variety of practices and the free use of multiple languages is observed.

I: And what language do you speak at home?

CH: It depends, because for example with my dad we speak more Polish, with my mom I speak Ukrainian and with my brother it depends, but more often Polish. Depending on the need and the situation. (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

### Family practices

Children talk about ways they spend time together with their parents. These include watching TV, playing games, eating meals, spending vacations together, doing religious practices or learning Polish together. Some of them say that they watch Polish films and YouTube videos together to learn the language or watch films in their native language to have a good time, as described in the section above. Chechen children from schools located next to the centres for foreigners, but also some Ukrainian children from schools in big cities say that cooking and eating together is a way to keep their parents' culture of origin at home. However, it is usually a combination of Polish cuisine (tomato soup, borscht) and the cuisine of their parents' origin (gałuszki, manty, pielmieni, varienniki) (PL\_F3\_CH).

I: And tell me what dishes you eat most often at home. Are these dishes Chechen, or are they Polish? Because you have lived in Poland for a long time.

CH: Oh, yes. A lot of Chechen food is cooked by my mother using Polish products. Well, of course we eat Polish products because it would be difficult to import Chechen products to Poland. But this is rather...All these are Chechen dishes. (PL\_I25\_CH\_G)

Another food-related activity is the celebration of religious holidays in Muslim families, which is an important part of maintaining the culture of the parents' country of origin.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

### Summary of all results

The study examines the experiences of two distinct groups of migrant children which reflect influxes of people coming to Poland and are an important and valuable cognitive exemplification of issues relating to

their education and adaptation. All the children were born outside Poland and, together with their families, went through a complex process of adaptation at school and in society.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, the following conclusions can be ventured. The focus is on the following topics: language acquisition and school achievements, the school as a lived social space: peer relations, conflicts, identity and belonging, and the Covid-19 pandemic in the eyes of children. Theoretical reflections based on the research are presented along with some recommendations.

### Language acquisition: Polish as a language of instruction

Research shows the importance of the language as a cultural capital for children's successes at school, their further educational plans and integration at school. It also plays a significant role outside the educational context as it shapes social interactions with their peers. The level of proficiency in Polish among children varies. The children of economic migrants, usually originating from Ukraine and Belarus, speak Polish much better than the children of refugees from Muslim countries. Geographical proximity and cultural affinity facilitate language learning, understanding and communication at school. While most of the children did not speak Polish before their migration to Poland, those whose mother tongue belongs to the same language group or whose parents supported in the process of language learning, have more advanced command of Polish. Yet, most of the interviewed children have some problems with the Polish language, especially concerning writing, applying grammar rules, and with producing fluent speech. This happens even though children attended additional, remedial Polish language classes that migrant children are entitled to, they also used help provided by intercultural assistants employed at school, or in a centre for foreigners or by volunteers. Over time, the children have become bilingual and they have not abandoned the use of their native language. In situations when they encounter limitations in their use of Polish language, they substitute missing word(s) with Russian, Chechen, or Ukrainian, and even English ones. In general, children indicate that migration contributes to their multilingualism (at various levels), which, in the future, will not only be an asset on the labour market, but for their families, and also for learning about the world and engaging in a multicultural dialogue (e.g. one of the refugee students knows five languages: Russian, Turkish, Kurdish, Polish, and English).

### School achievement and education plans

Despite a few individual successes, the refugee children are a disadvantaged group as concerns the further stages of their education, especially because of the peripheral location of the centre where they are located. This situation does not limit their educational aspirations and some boys mentioned dreams of becoming doctors, actors or policemen. Refugeeism, trauma, and uncertainties about the future of their parents exert an adverse impact on their educational aspirations. This is especially the case with girls, who often talked about the expectation of getting married early, even though they do not express their satisfaction with cultural norms in the country of their origin in that respect and talked about a desire to pursue their education. The boys, in turn, mentioned getting a job quickly and earning money. Refugee children live in large families, where they have several siblings (5 to 6), and this is a factor which means that they need to provide care for their younger siblings and help them with learning. Therefore, the educational chances of children depend on their Polish language skills, the educational aspirations of their parents and themselves, the economic capital of their families, the consequences of their refugee fate and cultural norms relating to gender.

Children arriving from Ukraine or Belarus are extremely ambitious and nearly all of them wish to go to universities and study prestigious disciplines such as: medicine, computer science, or biology. Children from Ukraine most often indicate that mathematics is their favourite subject as it poses no difficulties for them at school.



In a significantly emotional manner, the children described how they assess their teachers and the support provided by them, understanding their difficulties in acquiring knowledge, or failures to meet school obligations, especially during the pandemic. In principle, the first days or months of their stay in the new school shaped their attitude towards teachers. Most of the children positively assessed their teachers, quoting their kindness, the attractiveness of lessons and their merit-related content. They would seldom describe cases of a teacher displaying reluctance towards a migrant child, public disapproval of visible linguistic difficulties, or giving unfair grades for homework, tests, or short quizzes. Children talked about being afraid of speaking up in public and a fear of being laughed at and receiving low grades.

### Real school – ideal school

School is not only seen as a learning institution, one focused on carrying out educational activities, but it also constitutes an important interactive space. A positive image of Polish schools also emerges in contrast to schools in the children's countries of origin. Most of the children perceive them as welcoming and supportive places, and they would not change much about them. They accepted the school as it was, and those who made any remarks would point to the absence of choice at the canteen, too many children in the classroom, and the fact that grey colours predominate in the school building. Refugee children would also appreciate more peace and quiet at school, and expressed a desire for teachers to not shout at them during lessons. The presence of silence in the educational process is significant, especially in a time of ubiquitous noise and increasing hyperactivity of children and adolescents. Primarily, for children, an ideal school is one with fair, helpful teachers who can be trusted.

### Peer relations and the school environment

Based on narratives by many migrant children it appears that a classroom is an affective structure, one in which sympathies and antipathies were strongly manifested. The intensity and character of peer relations vary depending on the situation of each child, the school context, the family situation, and location. Together with teachers, students repeatedly perform complex emotional work to become accepted in the classroom and establish bonds with their peers. The school principal and teachers often sought to effectively solve the problems faced by migrant students using intercultural assistants. The role of the school administration, the sensitivity to migrant children's needs and their situation and a welcoming attitude from the form room teacher were crucial for establishing peer relations. Most of the children we interviewed did not speak Polish on arrival and therefore establishing peer relations was difficult. Nonetheless, a majority of the children pointed out to having Polish friends who had displayed kindness and friendship towards them, and also that they had received help in the case of a specific need. Based on the statements made by boys from Ukraine, it appears that establishing peer relations was easier when there were also other migrant children in the class. They highlighted vertical bonds among migrant students within the space of the entire school particularly strongly. The migrant 'groupings' formed by them are an important channel for the flow of information about the school, teachers, requirements, tasks, collaboration with other students, however, and importantly, they would stand up in defence of their colleagues in the event of aggression committed by other children. A few students highlighted being badly treated by their peers, the use of hate speech - 'why did you come here', 'you Ruskie', 'this is Poland here', and the use of physical violence. A few students mentioned a lack of relationships with Polish peers (e.g. sitting alone at their desks, it was hard for them to ask for peers to send them homework when they were absent from school). Others pointed out that they had not been invited to a schoolmate's house to a birthday party. With time, however, those relations improved in most cases, and the interpersonal attractiveness of migrant students increased. In children's narratives several elements were identified which helped them to integrate with their peers. Boys would play football together or their favourite online games, while girls would walk, talk, or browse favourite websites with classmates.



Polish schools are ceasing to be a nationally homogeneous institution and face numerous challenges regarding the equal treatment of students, work on multicultural education at school, and engagement in dialogue with migrant students. It is a social fact that alongside the old divisions which exist in Polish schools, including gender, social class, or place of residence, new dimensions are appearing such as ethnic group, nationality, religion, or migrant legal/social status. Considering intersectionality, Polish schools seem to be an increasingly complex construct and affective structure. Research shows that children also keep in touch with friends in their home country. In this respect, online tools are very useful, especially communicators like Messenger, Telegram, Viber, or Skype, and children sometimes also play computer games together with friends from their country of origin.

### Conflict and disagreements in school spaces

As already mentioned, migrant children mentioned violence at school several times, including fights (among boys), and hostile attitudes of peers towards them. However, what is significant for students is that they tried to resolve conflicts themselves without engaging either teachers or their parents. Therefore, children's agency was mostly realised when they managed to solve a difficult situation or conflict by themselves. Nonetheless, there were some situations presented which had to be resolved by teachers in collaboration with parents. In the case of two boys from refugee families who engaged in school fights, their fathers were asked to intervene. Such interventions by fathers occur rarely since children ask their mothers for help more often. In the case of the children from Ukraine and Belarus who were persecuted on the basis of their nationality, their mothers made a successful intervention which forced teachers to solve a problematic situation. Apart from parents, older siblings were also very often a trusted person for children.

### Identity and the sense of belonging

Statements made by children rather unambiguously highlighted that they are characterised by a gradually forming hybrid identity which is a complex construct resulting from a mixture of cultures, an impact of the receiving country's culture on their patterns of behaviour, its rules of social life concerning both a private and public sphere. As the children participating in the study are still in the process of identity formation, which is a developmental task for adolescents and emerging adults, we discussed experiences which indicate the development of a hybrid identity in the group of respondents. On one hand, the examined students clearly identify themselves with their country of origin, knowing who they are: Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chechens, or Kurds, and, on the other, they affirmed their life in Poland, which had improved the living conditions of their families, or as a safety shelter in the case of war and political persecutions in the country of origin of their parents. They like Poland, like learning at Polish schools and enriching their knowledge of the Polish language. Most of the examined students wish to live, continue their learning, and ultimately work in Poland, apart from a handful of students from Chechnya, who want to return to the homeland of their parents. They have a vivid memory of their place of origin and refer to original experiences from their childhood, school, peer relations, and primarily, relations with their family. Their memories of their country of origin are cherished in traditions passed on by their parents, online relations with members of their families and their friends and colleagues who had been left behind. Refugee children are socialised in accordance with the rules of Muslim religion and those rules are not challenged in their statements at all. Their parents, who strongly control all spheres of their lives, are authority figures for them. While almost all the children use the language of their country of origin at home, which is mainly Russian (being a demonstrative indicator of how strong Russia's colonial impact has been on forming the core of Ukrainian and Belarusian culture), or the Chechen and Russian languages in the case of refugee children. Children 'from behind Poland's eastern border' watch Russian television, read Russian books, and use the Russian Internet and play Russian online games. A majority of them do not attend religion classes and are not engaged in Orthodox religious practices at home. Culinary customs

characteristic for their culture are maintained, although they are also open to Polish food habits. Such transnational practices pursued by families must be strongly emphasised as they are focused on their country of origin, which is, among others, expressed in maintaining bonds with their next of kin, making visits, and inviting younger members of their families to Poland. They talk at least once a week with grandparents with whom they maintain bonds, and planning holiday trips to see them are particularly warmly mentioned by migrant children. Children are important actors in transnational family practices as they are the ones who create a transnational intergenerational arc which is a crucial element of their emerging identity (Slany, Strzemecka 2018).

### Theoretical implications and reflections arising from the research

Considering the results of our research, we believe that a concept of agency, rights and participation in communication, developed by Claudio Baraldi and his associates, is of particular importance and significance in explaining the agency of migrant children and their intercultural communication (Baraldi 2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2018). The CHILD-UP project actually “recognises children’s agency as children’s active participation enhanced through the availability of choices of action, which subsequently enhance alternative actions, and therefore change in the interaction” (Baraldi 2014a). While children’s active participation can happen at any time in communication, the achievement of agency needs the promotion of a child’s active participation in relation to choice and construction of meaning”. Being of key significance, the concept of a child-centred approach places the importance of children in the centre and is further appreciated by a child-friendly approach, which is defined as an “accessible, age appropriate, speedy, diligent adapter to and focused on the needs and right of the child, respecting the rights of the child including the rights to due process, to participate in and to understand the proceedings, to respect for private and family life and to integrity and dignity.” (Promoting ...2019). Migrant children’s agency may be analysed in terms of various dimensions and within socio-cultural contexts, institutional and legal considerations, and in terms of experiences relating to the integration of migrants, including children and their formation in the educational system.

As we emphasise, there are migrant children in every school in large cities and smaller towns, especially in places where Centres for Foreigners are located. In such towns, certain classes are made up of only refugee children. In a large city, the number of migrant children differs from class to class; there are usually 2-3 students present. Although these are small numbers, they nevertheless bring about changes in the structure of a class and the occurrence of important processes due to their ethnic and national, cultural, religious, and language context.

The concept of children’s agency allows the discovery of various forms of activities which also enhance children’s agency, finding differences and similarities among the countries participating in the Child UP project. Such an approach also allows attention to be focused on both the organized and informal activities of children, their participation in the life of their school, peers, and family. Undoubtedly, organized tasks and activities may be indicated that are pursued by schools which aim at supporting and empowering migrant children (additional Polish language classes, teachers working with children on a one-to-one basis, support provided by intercultural assistants, the employment of a Polish language teacher in centres for refugees). Schools are also often supported in those tasks by non-governmental organisations, the role of which in children’s integration appears to be unprecedented. We discovered that children’s agency is most evident in their efforts to learn Polish, in establishing peer relations and especially in the way children resolve conflict situations, including violence and bullying. In the future, special attention should be paid to the activities of informal circles composed of migrant children functioning within the school’s formal structures (e.g. involving Ukrainian or Chechen children). Research shows that those children are especially active during lessons (which was also proven during lesson observations conducted within WP6). There are many cautious signs about prospects for a substantial improvement of participation opportunities for

children in schools. The adoption of the presented concept shows which activities should be enhanced, developed, and followed in order to improve the quality of life of migrant children, and what aspects should be enhanced in order for the migrant pupils to feel important when expressing their opinions. By employing such a concept of agency, we may obtain a deeper insight into the choices made by children concerning their further educational plans, learn about their aspirations and those of their parent, and discover how the human capital of a migrant family can modify educational projects and endeavours. We will be then able to identify and explain migrant children's preferences for science subjects, the importance they attach to grades and how they assess their peer environment.

The results of our research allow us to stress the importance of the framework of intersectionality that has been highlighted in the CHILD UP project. Alongside gender, social class, and place of residence, new dimensions have appeared in Polish schools including: ethnicity, nationality, religion, country of immigration, and refugeeism. The educational achievements of children, their progress in learning, educational ambitions, and their identity are explicitly correlated with the migrant status of the children's parents. Children of economic migrants cope better at school and have high aspirations in comparison with refugee children. Different forms of agency (knowledge of the Polish language and its continuous improvement, preference for specific school subjects, having friends, trust in teachers and parents) depend on those dimensions, and which must be investigated further within a perspective of influences of the informal dimensions of the life of migrants.

As concerns refugee children, gender sensitive approaches turned out to be of extreme importance. Refugee girls feel obliged to follow the principles of Muslim religion and accept norms related to gender-driven roles. Only a few of them have high educational aspirations, since they know that they are expected to get married quite early (which is also seen in a statement made by a female teacher). They are thinking of returning to Chechnya where marriages have already been arranged for them. Girls from Ukraine and Belarus are very ambitious, dreaming of studying and pursuing prestigious professions. As regards their future, they are more focused on living in Poland than in their country of origin.

The concepts of hybrid identity are very useful in explaining the identity and sense of belonging of migrant children. Children combine what is important for their cultures of origin with the culture of a country of their migration. They learn Polish, improve their achievements at school, link their lives with Poland, know who they are, and which country they are from. At home, children talk in the language of their parents, and cherish their family relations, bonds with family members in their country of origin, religious (refugees), customary, and culinary traditions. Children are important agents of transnational family and national practices and this is a role which requires much deeper research and analysis.

### Summary of the situation of migrant children in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic

Remote learning was a long-lasting experience and involved the significant rearrangement of children's lives and those of their siblings and parents. In the opinion of migrant children, remote learning was assessed differently, having both its advantages and disadvantages.

Children highlighted a break in their direct relations with teachers and certain difficulties in understanding lessons. During traditional forms of learning they were able to ask questions, and the teacher could immediately respond to a child's requests. During distance learning, there were cases of children not doing their homework, which was due to their lack of understanding of lessons and the teacher's orders.

Intercultural assistants offered significant support for children, however, they could only help them with their homework or in transferring essential information in an online mode only. Their limited contacts with Polish peers prevented them from asking for clarifications or obtaining help in doing lessons. Students would indicate that teachers did not require switching cameras on, which provided for anonymisation of



the lessons and major leniency towards their merit-based relations with the teacher. The time of remote learning stopped the process of active participation in the lesson, the mandatory use of the Polish language, developing interactions with the teacher and schoolmates. It undoubtedly contributed to children becoming invisible, hiding behind a switched-off camera and being seated in a “home room”. The role of the language of the child’s country of origin is highlighted and amplified during the pandemic. Thus, further research should be conducted into the impact of the pandemic on children’s language skills and their integration process. Furthermore, the invisibility and silence of children are an adverse development brought about by remote learning, the consequences of which would take us much longer to explore than we have space at this time.

The absence of a direct contact with peers from the classroom was very negatively assessed. Some of the children mentioned that they sometimes would make appointments in the playground with their school friends from their country of origin. Nonetheless, a clear majority of the relations were established in a screen-to-screen mode.

Most of the children had their own computer equipment, however, it did not mean that it was high quality hardware, since children would mention failures of cameras, speakers, and on-line connection breaks and the main technical obstacle was the weak internet connection. Technical obstacles were a serious constraint on full participation in lessons. Some migrant children, especially those from families with multiple children, were provided with computer equipment by the school, or (especially in the case of refugee students) laptops were purchased by the ‘For the Earth’ Association thanks to an online fundraising event organised especially for that purpose. Arranging a space for learning posed a serious challenge for parents and children pointed out that conditions for remote learning were not comfortable because of the modest housing conditions and sharing one room space with 2 or 3 of their siblings.

Among the advantages of the remote learning, children mostly appreciated having more time to sleep and the lack of a need to get up early was an extra bonus afforded by the pandemic.

According to the interviewed teachers and intercultural assistants (see the WP5 report with professionals), the pandemic stopped the process of the integration of foreign children, locking them up in their ‘termite mounds’ or huge blocks of flats/centres, thus translating into worse learning results.

## Recommendations

- Paying attention to areas of conflicts between Polish and migrant children within the school and non-school space;
- Drawing the attention of teachers, principals, parents, and intercultural assistants to hostile attitudes towards migrant children;
- Anti-discrimination workshops for children and teachers; Developing training, methods of mediation in the event of conflicts, violence at school, ridicule, and harassment;
- Supporting children’s education across all subjects, with a special focus on Polish language and history aimed at providing additional opportunities for learning based on lived interactions with teacher;
- Fair grading of migrant children’s papers/ test /essays, avoiding bias and favouring Polish children;
- Promoting friendships among children with and without a migration background;
- Recognising the identity of migrant children, their religious and cultural practices;
- Recognising and supporting multiculturalism of Polish school.

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