Returning Children Migrants – Main Challenges in School Environment

PAULINA SZYDŁOWSKA[1]
Jagiellonian University

JOANNA DURLIK
Jagiellonian University

HALINA GRZYMAŁA-MOSZCZYŃSKA
Ignatianum University in Kraków

The present paper is based on the research project "(Un)easy returns home. The functioning of children and young people returning from emigration", the main goal of which was to investigate and describe the experience of children from Polish returning migrant families, and specifically to answer the question: **What kind of challenges do children from families returning to Poland face when entering the Polish educational system?** We conducted qualitative research taking into consideration four perspectives: children, adolescents, parents and teachers. In this paper, we focus on the most important challenges in a new educational context based on the narrations of children, adolescents, parents and teachers and dividing the challenges into three groups: purely educational, socio-cultural and emotional. Finally, we also discuss best practices which proved helpful for children's adaptation to the new environment and which may be used in the school context.

Keywords: return migration, children migrants, return culture shock, integration, education

Review of existing research

In the studies on migration, the perspective of migrating children has been overlooked for many years (NíLaoire et al., 2010, Hatfield, 2010). Much of the collected data focuses on perspectives from refugees and economic migrants, with researchers

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[1] Corresponding author: Paulina Szydłowska, paulina.m.szydlowska@gmail.com

reporting that many of them struggle to become included in new settlement societies, facing discrimination, hostility and exclusion (Fassetta, 2015; McGovern and Devine, 2015; NíLaoire et al., 2011; Sirriyeh, 2010; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Katartzi, 2017). Even though the body of migration research is rapidly growing, only a small proportion focuses on the situation of returning child migrants. Emotional functioning in terms of the return itself can be influenced by culture shock. Whilst culture shock as a frequent psychological response to contact with a new culture is widely reported in the literature, the issue of re-entry culture shock (reverse culture shock) is a relatively rare research topic (Szkudlarek, 2009). Both returnees and host institutions erroneously assume that returning to the home country will not be a problem or that it will be much easier than adapting to another culture (Black & Gregersen, 1998). Frequently, people returning to the country of origin have an idea that they will return exactly to the same country which they left some years ago. They are not prepared to face the changes which have taken place in their country in general and in their immediate environment in particular. They are also often unaware of the different changes which they need to face on returning to the home country. For example, their socio-economic status often changes since, having usually earned more during emigration, disappointment can ensue as a result of lower income levels upon return (Szkudlarek, 2009, by: Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2015).

From the developmental perspective, the claim that children experience the migration process differently to adults should not raise doubts. During a few or even several years of their life they did not have enough opportunities to experience demanding situations and develop cognitive and emotional coping mechanisms. Also, from a purely cognitive perspective, they may not yet have reached the developmental stage known as the formal operational period (Piaget, 2006, by: Brzezińska, Appelt & Ziółkowska, 2017). This is crucial for the ability to think about abstract concepts and imagine detailed consequences of behaviors and decisions, and may lead to greater culture shock after a change in living place. It is crucial to emphasize that when they associate the country of a parent´s origin with holidays and leisure time, they may not be able to imagine that after moving to this country they will have to go to school, do house work, or that they might lose close contact with their friends.

Children from returning families often experience migration as emigration to a more or less unknown country because only the migration of the parents is a return migration (Zuniga and Hamann, 2014). Therefore, children experience their own emigration as a break from existing social ties, especially at school and in their neighborhood, and at the same time as a challenge because of the need to create new social relationships (Hamann and Zúñiga 2011; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield and Quiroz, 2001). The perspective of returning child migrants has been introduced in research about "home" and "belonging" (Hatfield, 2010; Ni Laoir, 2010), as a ritual of passage between childhood and adulthood (Ungruche, 2010) and psychosocial well-being (Vathi and Duhi, 2015). Zana Vathi and Veronica Duhi

(2016) report that returning child migrants from Greece to Albania suffered from emotional problems such as confusion, sadness and stress-related symptoms but also problems with communication and education. Children aged 12 years or younger were less psychologically affected than older ones. This might be explained by the higher importance of the peer group during adolescence. Older children suffered from **the breaking of social bonds** with friends in Greece. **A lack of language skills appears** as an important and impactful stress factor upon children's ability to function in a new environment. This has been additionally reinforced by a discriminating reaction on the part of peers and teachers. The study reports that one of the strongest emotions experienced by Albanian returnee children was that of embarrassment at school, because of an inability to express themselves in Albanian. Many of them suffer from isolation, as previously mentioned in Knör's (2005) research on Germans coming back from South Africa. Furthermore, research on the mental health of adolescents with migration experience report that this population suffers from emotional stress (Khouri, 2016). Studies of children and adolescents returning from Sweden to Finland (Vuorenkoscki et al. 2001) have shown that the prevalence of mental illness, hospitalization and the transmission of infectious diseases was more frequent in this group than among the non-migratory population. Researchers underline that differences in the incidence and number of hospitalizations between the group of returning migrants and the control group (each returning migrant child had been assigned to an age-matched non-migrant counterpart from the same class and school in Finland) may stem from the greater anxiety and stress caused by migration which contributed to the health of this group. Vathi and Duhi (2015) claim that not much research has been conducted on child migration in the context of family returns to the country of origin.

During the period of adolescence, a peer group starts to be more impactful than parents (Oleszkowicz, Senejko, 2013). Therefore, every time children change their school environment they have to make new friends and say goodbye to friends from the foreign country. Children are more sensitive to changes than adults because they have still not developed the relevant coping strategies with such experiences. Research on migration processes within child and adolescent groups is very complex. Both John W. Berry at all. (2006) and Peter Titzman and Reichar Lee (2018) highlight the need to implement developmental considerations into acculturation research because those children simultaneously experience both acculturation and a developmental transition. Peter Titzman and Reichar Lee (2018) claim that when those processes are not well differentiated, immigrant youth may be unnecessarily stigmatized (e.g., by highlighting the differences between immigrants and natives, even though they are in fact more similar than different) or may not receive the required support (e.g., when their specific- migration related – needs are not recognized). Young and adolescent migrants simultaneously experience biological, social and psychological changes so these challenges related to the adaptation process are more complex (Graber and

Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Migrant children, after changing their place of residence, must quickly learn new cultural scripts in order to adapt to the new setting. The younger the child, the fewer scripts she has consolidated and therefore she can learn the patterns prevailing in the immigration country faster (Jurek, 2015). It does not mean that child does not suffer from acculturation stress, which can manifest itself through various psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. stomach ache, headache), and emotional reactions (loneliness, disappointment with the new country, sadness).

Returning migrants in Poland: statistics

The exact number of students who return (or arrive) to Poland after a period of living and attending school abroad is not known. The Polish educational system provides support for children who were studying before in a different country. Children can participate in additional Polish language classes and extra lessons, during which children can catch up with subjects such as history, chemistry etc.[1] Estimates tend to conflate the number of Poles who return after a period of emigration to Poland and the number of children of Polish nationality who have enrolled in additional Polish language classes because of their insufficient command of the Polish language. The number of returning migrants in Polish schools is growing. However, neither the Ministry of Education nor the Main Statistical Office have collected the relevant data. School statistics are missing the category of children who have spent a significant part of their education outside Poland. The number of students with Polish origins who arrive in Poland and participate in additional Polish language classes grew from 280 in 2012/2013 to 1,355 in 2016/2017. However, the data is incomplete, mostly due to the fact that the parents or the child do not always report their migration experience to the school and request additional educational help.

Some other pieces of research among the group of Polish migrant children in the UK have covered the following topics: identity development (Moskal, 2014, Kaczmarek-Day, 2013), the role of cultural capital in adaptation processes (Moskal, 2016), relations with peers and family members (Fox and Sime, 2015), intergenerational learning of values and principles in migrant families (Sime and Pietka-Nykaza, 2015), exploring the experiences of mothers bringing up children abroad from a feminist perspective (Pustułka, 2014).

The project "(Un)easy return home" was, to the best of our knowledge, the first attempt to identify the specific educational needs of children from returning Polish families and to better understand their functioning in the Polish school context. From the very start, the project was of a pragmatic character and its aim was to formulate recommendations for teachers and parents on supporting children with migration experience. To this aim, we gathered an extensive set of data and intended to diagnose the most urgent difficulties which such children are struggling with. In the present

text we focus mostly on the diagnosed challenges in order to raise the awareness of teachers and parents about the potential difficulties which the children may face. We do not claim, however, that all children from returning families experience all of the identified challenges or that the negative aspects are likely to dominate the migration experience. We found this data relevant and meaningful during the analysis but as we did not implement quantitative research, we cannot provide generalizations for the whole population. It shows the experiences of our sample and indicates that, at least in some cases, the described experiences might occur.

Method

Participants

In our study we employed a qualitative approach in order to better understand the experiences of children from returning families related to entering Polish educational system and answer the following question: **What kind of challenges do children from returning to Poland families face when entering Polish educational system?** In order to understand the experiences of children better, we decided to compare different perspectives (children, adolescents, parents and teachers), by interviewing not only our target population, i.e. children who came to Poland with their families, but also their parents and teachers (Uprichard, 2008). We tested 34 children (20 girls and 14 boys) and teenagers, 27 parents and 25 teachers. The discrepancy between the number of children and adults stemmed from the fact that in some families more than one child was interviewed and in some cases a teacher refused to participate in the study or was unavailable. The age range was 5–20 years (M=10,5 years; SD=3,39) but we decided to exclude the data collected with 5 year-olds and the 20 year-old girls in the analysis used in the current article.

For the analyses we divided our participants into two age groups: students aged from 7 to 12 were considered as children and students aged from 12 to 18 were considered adolescents. These borders also reflect the age of students attending primary school (from 6/7 to 12/13 years) and secondary school in Poland.[2] In the literature the boundaries of entering adolescence are not sharp – Anna Oleszkowicz and Alicja Senejko (2013) assume that adolescence covers the period from 10/12 up to 17–20/23 years old; they also divide the latter period into early and late adolescents, but we could not use this division because of the limited size of our research group.

The average length of stay abroad by research participants was around 6.5 years and the host countries were: UK, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands,

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[2] The school ages in Poland are changing at present but were as given above in 2015 when the study was conducted.

USA, Ireland, Norway, Hungary and Spain. 14 children had lived in Poland for longer than 5 years before the migration period (consequently, their arrival in Poland was indeed a return), whereas 20 children were either born abroad or emigrated before the age of 5, excluding the possibility that they might have had any conscious memories of living in Poland before emigration. The cut-off point of 5 years was based on existing literature on child amnesia (Jagodzińska, 2008). All respondents met two criteria: they came to Poland no more than two years prior to the research and they had spent at least one year abroad.

Data and procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews. The core list of questions was prepared based on an extended literature review (for sample questions see Table 1 below; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2014; Hamann and Zúñiga 2011; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield and Quiroz, 2001) and was separate for each group (i.e. children and adolescents, parents, and teachers). However, in each interview the researchers supplemented the core questions with additional ones, following the individual participant's narration and in line with semi-structured interview methodology (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2005). It helped obtain knowledge about the specific situation of individual Polish children from returning families. The interview guide of each type of interview may be found in the extended report from the entire project, while examples of questions used can be found in the table below. In case of the youngest participants (children under 9 years), the interview was supported with two additional tasks: the completion of a sketch of two houses by the child, namely one in which the child used to live in the country of emigration, and another of their current home in Poland; reading a short story about migration with a researcher, presented as children's story book (adapted from: Schubeck, 2000).

Interviews with children and parents were predominantly conducted in participants' homes, whereas interviews with teachers took place at schools. Prior to the interview, participants were informed about the goals of the study, its anonymity and signed the consent form; in the case of underage participants, an additional consent form was also signed by a parent. Each interview was recorded and transcribed after the research session. Finally, the data was qualitatively analyzed using a thematic analysis of children's experiences (emotions, attitudes, events, observations) taking into consideration different perspectives (children, parents, teachers). We compared the narrations of participants within each group and then provided a comparison between the perspectives of each group. The tool which we used to analyze the data and which allowed us to conduct comparisons between narrations was the QDA Miner program (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, version 4.1.21). The code trees were based on each interview guide and extended when significant for respondent threads going beyond the guide appeared.

Table 1.

Part of the interview guide, with different categories of respondents

Categories of challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Educational challenges	– What is this school like after your return? [Jak jest teraz w tej szkole po powrocie? – What do you like here? [Co ci się w niej podoba?] – What do you dislike here? [Co ci się nie podoba?] – What is your favorite subject and why? [Jaka jest twoja ulubiona lekcja i dlaczego?] – Do you like learning and doing your homework? Which subject particularly? [Lubisz się uczyć? Odrabiać zadania? Z jakiego przedmiotu najbardziej?] – What is easiest and most difficult for you? [Co jest najłatwiejsze/najtrudniejsze?]	– How was X doing at school right after their return?[Jak X [imię dziecka] sobie radził/radziła w szkole na początku, po powrocie?] – How is X doing at school at the moment [Jak X teraz radzi sobie w szkole?] – What does she have difficulties with? What is going well? [Z czym ma trudności? Co mu/jej idzie dobrze?	– What difficulties does the return migration bring? A. For the child herself: what difficulties does she experience? B. for the whole class? C. for the whole school? D. for the teacher? [Jakie trudności wynikają z powrotu z emigracji? a. Dla samego dziecka – jakich trudności doświadcza? b. Dla całej klasy? c. Dla całej szkoły? d. Dla nauczyciela/nauczycielki?]
Socio--cultural challenges	– What did the first days at school after your return look like? [Jak mijały pierwsze dni w szkole po powrocie?] – What did your teacher do when you first came to school? [Co zrobił nauczyciel/nauczycielka, gdy przyszedłeś/przyszłaś po raz pierwszy do klasy po powrocie?] – What did the class do when you first came to school? [Co zrobiła klasa, gdy przyszedłeś/przyszłaś do szkoły pierwszy raz po powrocie?]	– How did peers react to X? [Jak rówieśnicy zareagowali na X?] – Does she have friends at the moment? [Czy teraz ma kolegów/koleżanki?] – Is she in touch with her friends from the previous place? [Czy utrzymuje kontakt z kolegami/koleżankami z poprzedniego miejsca zamieszkania?]	How do the children function at school following their return? a. Similar to Polish students? b. Are there any differences between them and the rest of students? [Jak funkcjonują w szkole dzieci po powrocie? a. Podobnie jak uczennice i uczniowie polscy? b. Czy się jakoś różnią?]

Categories of challenges	Children	Parents	Teachers
Emotional challanges	– What made you happy after the return? [Co cię najbardziej ucieszyło po powrocie?] – What made you upset or angry after the return? [Co cię najbardziej zasmuciło lub zezłościło po powrocie?] – How did you feel at school during your first days there?[Jak się czułeś w szkole podczas pierwszych dni?]	How did the children feel after the return?[A dla dziecka/dzieci? Jak się czuły po powrocie?]	What difficulties does return migration bring? For the child herself: what difficulties has she experienced? [Jakie trudności wynikają z powrotu z emigracji? Dla samego dziecka – jakich trudności doświadcza?]

As mentioned in the Introduction, the presented analyses mainly focus on the challenges and problematic issues revealed in the analyzed material.

It seems that the most important challenges faced by returning children and adolescents at Polish schools may be divided into three main areas: purely educational (related to communication skills and program differences), socio-cultural (cultural differences and relations with peers) and emotional.

Entering Polish school

Generally, the interviewed children were afraid of their first days at Polish school. In many cases, they reported that they could not understand what was happening around them, especially when teachers were not informed that a new student would join the class: then the feeling of being lost was experienced by both student and teacher. In addition, the behavior of other pupils was often not friendly enough.

R [Researcher]: Tell me what you remember from your first day at school.
P [Participant]: The teacher asked Kornel, my best friend, if he could show me around. He said "yes" and we were standing together and chatting, and the other kids were coming in. It was ok, I was a bit shy. [boy, Germany, 10 years] **[5]**

The situation was different when the teacher introduced the newcomer to the rest of the group or facilitated his/her integration with peer group, making other peers feel responsible for helping the newcomer. Then, they talk about this experience in a positive way. It seems that new students' feeling of comfort depended mostly

on the skills, sensitivity and supportive attitude of the teacher but also on a feeling of being treated in a friendly manner and being accepted by at least some children from the new class group.

I mean, there was loads of stress, it was just as I had expected before; the stress was even greater because I had to go to the opening day alone and the first few weeks, the first month I had to cope on my own [3]. [boy, Germany, 15 years [4]]

Some research participants reported that they felt lonely during the first weeks, something in line with previous studies which showed that returning children can suffer from isolation because it is assumed that they should be able to settle in without difficulties (Knörr, 2005) and thus some teachers tend to treat them as any other "regular" native student with no need for being supported in the integration process within a peer group. The feeling of loneliness was more present in the group of adolescents rather than in the group of children.

Language

The most visible and impactful difficulty experienced by returnee students pertained to their lack of proficiency in Polish. This limited both their learning capabilities and the process of building relationships with peers. Most frequently, both children and adolescents had limited exposure to Polish language during their stay abroad – mostly at home or/ and (sometimes) at Polish Saturday school.

P: It turned out, the teacher told me later, that there were some gaps, because Łucja did not know the terms in Polish, she did not know that "to subtract" means "To subtract", she used to speak "less" or "minus", so when she finally mastered these things, it turned out she is great at maths and her only problem was with text tasks where she did not understand some words and this actually happens even now. [mother, girl, UK, 6 years] [6]

In most cases, it was limited to the colloquial language used in everyday communication. Students admitted that they could not understand specific terms related to school subjects and found it difficult to comprehend teachers instructions. This problem was frequently overlooked by teachers and sometimes even by parents, especially when a child was able to express herself fluently in Polish and was able to communicate effectively.

She did not know Polish letters, written I mean, she only knew block letters and he used them writing. The biggest problem were the written letters as we already had trained writing all year long. Both the letters and the way of linking them, direction of writing, it was all important and we were worried if she would manage. [teacher, girl, UK, 8 years] [7] **179**

In schools abroad (in Western Europe and North America), teachers do not pay as much attention to the style and technique of handwriting, so after returning to Poland, students needed to invest much effort, patience and time for developing their calligraphy skills so that their handwriting was accepted at school. Beside the writing problem, adolescents spoke about difficulties with fluent reading in Polish, learning from Polish handbooks and especially understanding poetry and set texts in old (sometimes medieval) Polish language.

As educational and psycholinguistic research clearly shows, communicative competence cannot be equated with Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency (Cummings, 1979), and only the latter comprises all of the requisite skills required in school, i.e. reading, writing and comprehending complex texts.

It was hard at school at the beginning, because I could understand 75% of what I was told and I did not know some words. But later, after a month or so at school, it was better, I could understand most things. Now I can read and write a little. [boy, Netherlands, 17 years] **[8]**

Last but not least, as research with returning children migrants mostly from Great Britain and US to Ireland shows (Ni Laoire, 2011), it is mainly accent and perceived nationality which are markers of difference in peer networks, and can be used to stigmatize and exclude return-migrant children. In the Irish research, children felt marked out as different by peers or being bullied because of their different accents or for not 'being Irish'. In the Polish context, children were called names coined in relation to the nationality of people in the country of their parent's emigration. We will focus on this aspect in respect to Polish children in the later part of this paper dedicated to relations with peers.

Other educational challenges are the differences in school program between Poland and the former country of migration and the lack of sufficient support provided for returnees students by Polish teachers. This is particularly visible in the group of adolescents who return after a few years of studying in another education system.

School, well, it was quite a burden, it was still a completely different system, more subjects, much greater requirements, and this language barrier. Although he did not have problems to communicate, he had great problems with writing and reading, he still has. (...) I had problems with school since at the beginning I was reassured that the child of course would get special treatment. We even came back in April and I fixed it with the school that he would go to school for two months to adapt to the system, to see how it worked, to make friends, to avoid a situation that at this fourth grade he comes and it is all such a surprise "what am I doing here?". They noticed during these two months that he had some difficulties but even the headteacher admitted that she had neglected it then because he had his special rules. And in the fourth grade serious problems started.

For example, they did not consider that he was not able to copy something quickly. (..)
Yes. And that for example, orthography, grammar, he does not know what is it about and
he needs more time to learn this all. [mother, boy, UK, 11 years] **[9]**

In many countries, compulsory school education begins at the age of five, therefore in some cases children repeat the material previously acquired during education in the country of migration. As a result, students sometimes became bored and discouraged. This mainly relates to the situation of children who had attended a higher grade at school in the country of emigration but were assigned to a lower grade in Poland because of their age. A particularly difficult experience pertains to the situation of students returning from countries where English was the first language of instruction. Their command of English was much higher than that of their classmates.

Of course, it is all because of the educational, program differences. I mostly teach history
and I can see that the boy needed to catch up a lot. And I can see that his situation is
difficult because the program differences are not only here, not only in history.[teacher,
boy, Spain, 15 years] **[10]**

At the same time, children had problems with subjects such as of history, mathematics, chemistry or biology because of a lack of knowledge of relevant vocabulary, as well as differences in program content in other education systems. Program differences were especially stressful and important for those students who were to take final exams (after the respective school level) soon after coming to Poland and had to catch up with a lot of content in a short time.

Fractions, that was the worst thing. Fractions were difficult… Simply, it was something
we did not learn there and here they already knew it. Surely the nature was something
easy, we worked on topics I was already familiar with, so finally it was more like a revision
for me. And art, and music. The first lesson in history, an additional one, simply started
with this Polish history, like the kingdom and stuff, and at the fifth lesson I already had
the program from the sixth grade. It was quite difficult. And actually it helped, I was not
worried about this. [girl, Italy, 12 years] **[11]**

The excerpts above clearly reveal two main areas of educational challenges: difficulties with Polish language as the language of education and curriculum differences. Although, both may seem obvious for the sensible reader, some teachers of our participants proved to be unaware of their children's needs. Based on interviews, with parents we may conclude that children are usually able to catch up pretty effectively if adequate support is given. Some of the parents decided to provide private lessons for their children, but obviously not every family may afford relatively high and usually long-term expenses.

Socio-cultural differences

Secondly, returning students often encountered significant socio-cultural differences, both between the school organization (such as the grading system, formal aspects of the student-teacher relationship, attitude to plagiarism etc.) and also in the rules of how to function within a peer group. Sometimes, because of both cultural differences and an insufficient fluency in Polish, they experienced discrimination from the peer group. This was described previously in Ni Laoire's (2011) research, which shows that some children's pronunciation and other aspects of their behavior which apparently diverged from the school norms sufficed as reasons to be mocked by schoolmates.

I do not know if it was about her departure or not… I mean later she also had this problem, that other students had negative attitude toward her, I do not know why exactly, the called her names at the beginning: "German, German", but it was very negatively marked. She cared about this. At the moment, well, she does not pay attention to this name at all. [teacher, girl, Germany, 15 years] **[12]**

In many cases, the children were excluded from the peer group because of a lack of familiarity with local norms and customs. As our research shows, it was easier for children to make friends rather than for adolescents.

I did not like it much when I was going to school. They kept calling me names "look, this strange one from Italy came". All of them ran away from me and only one… only this girl Wiktoria, she… we were both interested in animals and painting. [girl, Italy, 8 years] **[13]**

R: And tell me, do you sometimes help your friends from the class?
P: With English? Yes.
R: And how do you do this? The teacher asks you or you do it on your own?
P: If they ask me, well… often one guy… well, he is not my friend, because he greeted me with a kick in my stomach when I first came to school.
R: Why did he do this?
P: Well, because this is what he is, naughty
R: Did you tell your teacher about this?
P: Yeah
R: And what did she do?
P: She said that if he did it again, he would go to the headteacher because it was not the first time he had done something like this. [boy, England, 9 years] **[14]** [A6]

Another challenge resulting from growing up in a different cultural context is the lack of knowledge of the rules and binding norms at Polish school, especially those pertaining to teacher-student communication. Even though some children who participate in classes in Polish Saturday school can be aware about the atmosphere in Polish schools, many children need time to learn new rules. Also, teachers reported that they needed time to understand some of (returnees) students' behaviors. One

example of such a behavior was addressing the teacher by their first name or giving her a handshake as a goodbye, which in Polish schools can be treated as an undesirable attempt to reduce the distance between student and teacher. Such behavior in the Polish context can easily be labeled as an "impolite behavior", as well as being a source of conflict within the peer group.

At the beginning, the children had some English influences and it was difficult for them to use typical expressions like "Sir" or "Miss", they started calling the teachers by their first names and the other children laughed because they were not used to this. I was somewhat upset myself, but she quickly learned that we talk like this here.[teacher, US, girl, 10 years] **[15]**

There were funny situations because in Switzerland all children come to the teacher and shake her hand. And in general children shake hands with adults to say hello and goodbye, it is completely different here in Poland. And Franek made them laugh at school, because he used to approach his teacher to say "hello", "goodbye" and he kept doing the same… And Julek did the same, didn't he? And then he approached the teacher and hid his hand "Yes, you don't do this in Poland". [mother, Switzerland, one of them – 9 years] **[16]**

As we (Szydłowska et al. 2017) previously described in an article on the discrimination experienced by returning child migrants, it is related to the cultural dimension defined as power distance (Hofstede 1980, 1983, for: Matsumoto, 2007). In countries with a high power distance, the teacher is treated with respect, for example students get up when the teacher enters the classroom. The teacher is responsible for the educational process, all forms of communication are initiated by the teacher and any behavior which might be interpreted as undermining the teacher's authority (for example, a handshake or calling the teacher by their first name) is unacceptable (Hofstede, 2007). The low power distance implies a partner type relationship, the student is the subject of the educational process, his or her opinion and initiative are valued. In German-speaking and Scandinavian countries, as well as in the United States and Great Britain, the index of power distance on the scale proposed by Hofstede is much lower than in Poland and these are all countries from which Polish families often return. This can generate various misunderstandings, both in the relationship between the child in the returning family and the teacher, but also between child and the peer group.

Differences mentioned by children, adolescents and parents were also related to the dress code, the amount of homework and the standards of evaluating children's work.

So we came to school at the first day and we learnt that uniforms are needed and all. So I did not have it on the first day and everybody knew I was new. They gathered around me and they said "hi, I am this and this" and so on.[girl, Norway, 16 years] **[17]**

*And this spelling error, from the first grade on in Poland there is huge focus on that in Poland, isn't there, and each error is underlined in red, children are taught to write less, but correctly, in England it was the other way around, absolutely. [mother, UK, two girls – 9 years and 5,5 years and one boy 7 years] **[18]***

Parents were very often critical about the methods used by teachers in Polish schools. This applies both to the teaching techniques and the organization of additional activities. Some parents pointed to the lack of cooperation and sensitivity of teachers and school management for the specific problems and needs of the child. The most frequent complaints pertained to improper instruction methods, described as archaic, schematic and destroying the natural curiosity and creativity of children. For example, some parents regretted that Polish schools did not use project-based methods which allow students to integrate information from different fields. At the same time, according to parental experiences, children generally had limited options to continue learning foreign languages at an appropriate level. Another perceived problem was too much of a narrow focus on test results and competition between classmates rather than on overall child development. At the same time, some parents clearly emphasized that they appreciated the Polish school more than the school in the country of emigration, mainly because of the level of instruction, the emphasis on students' work and learning rather than on spending time on play. Finally, it is worth noticing that most parents assess individual teachers better (contact with them, their help addressed to the child, adapting the requirements to knowledge and the child's skills) than the educational system in Poland as a whole.

Emotional challenges

The third group of challenges related to return migration – emotional difficulties – were mostly reported by parents. In the literature, individual differences in emotions experienced on return are mentioned as well (Vathi and Duchi, 2016). For some, the process of moving to Albania was not quick but for others it was sudden and upsetting. Previous studies show that (Ebata et al., 1996) when participants had the motivation to migrate – more evident in cases where parents had transmitted the language and held positive opinions on Albania, or among those who had experienced harsh discrimination in Greece – they did not show severe psychosocial consequences upon their return.

Similarly to the previous studies, children and adolescents from Polish returning families talked about ambivalent emotions. On one hand, especially in younger children, we observed more positive emotions (happiness, joy) as a reaction to moving closer to their extended family. On the other hand, the narrations of adolescents showed the tendency to experience sadness related to the loss of their social network and daily routines in the country of emigration. The emotional background was

recognized and described by both children and parents, but children were more willing to report positive emotions than difficult ones. Struggling with school and social challenges in most cases proved to be a demanding task which, together with the stress evoked by leaving the former familiar environment, school and friends abroad, caused mild or more severe emotional distress and adaptation difficulties in many cases.

I remember that Stas had a period of bed-wetting, Lidka was anxious after returning to Poland **[19]**. *(mother, UK, boy, 7 years and girl, 9 years)*

At the beginning he used to cry, you know, I mean he cried at home because the teachers did not tell me if he did at school as well. But at home, I am telling you, sometimes it was awful. Before he went to school. Even when he was younger, he had not cried like this. But well, at home. At school he was, you know, so quiet. It was different than in the other school, but there, you know, he had friends before, and here he did not know anyone. [mother, boy, UK] **[20]**

Even though parents were more open to sharing their observations about the emotional challenges of their children than the children themselves, one of our 14-year old respondents shared her own experience with us:

R: I have individual teaching because I had a depressive episode. The psychiatrist said that actually everything there, these examinations came out well, so I felt bad because of nerves and stress, because of this England. It affected me badly, that I ... I'm just really, I would never go to England again. It is better if you leave when you are a small child, I don't know, maybe up to six years. I would not want to go there for a second time, second – third. (England, 14 year-old-girl multiple migration).

The influence of the child's emotions on their functioning in school rarely appeared spontaneously in interviews with teachers, and so the issue needed to be explicitly raised by researchers. It seems that it was much easier for teachers to refer to purely school problems, such as language skills or differences in educational program. This may indicate difficulties in diagnosing children's distress due to teachers' insufficient preparation for meeting the needs of children with migration experiences.

Discussion

In the present paper we decided to focus on the challenges experienced by migrant students in the school context and also to "give a voice" to our participants themselves and allow them to speak about their experiences in their own words. Although the overall picture may seem excessively negative, this is precisely what the families who voluntarily participated in the project decided to reveal. It is worth noticing that these were examples of children who had ultimately adapted to Polish educational environ-

ment and remained in Poland. We were unable to reach those families which decided to go back abroad. As explained in the methodology section, the recruitment process could not be randomized and as a result we certainly did not reach families representing the entire diversity of possible migration experiences. In order to shed some light on the rather dim picture emerging from the project, at the end of this paper we briefly discuss best practices recommended for teachers working with migrant students.

An analysis of the interviews points to differences in the experiencing of a return (arrival) to Poland by children from the different age cohorts. The role of teachers and parents become particularly important in the process of coping with migration by children (7–12 years old). As we can observe, all of the participant groups (children, adolescents, parents, teachers) admit that children from returning families were entering school in Poland with insufficient language skills and limited knowledge about the cultural norms in the Polish educational system. Therefore, some of them say that they experienced low marks and critical comments from teachers who did not seem to be aware of their difficulties and this was related to experiencing sadness and anger. In the long run, we can suppose that it may result in student's struggling to develop a sense of competence and to meet the situational demands. Without support from school, they may develop a passive attitude and low self-esteem which in turn would make integration with their new-old country and environment even more difficult. On the other hand, children who felt supported and welcomed by peers and teachers felt better and it took them less time to identify as a part of the group. A proactive teacher attitude, up-to-date professional knowledge (regarding the psychological aspects of migration and ways of supporting children and parents with migration experiences) and sensitivity seem to be most constructive ways of overcoming or even partially preventing such difficulties, consequently helping the returning students to build a sense of self-worth and allowing them to cope with the numerous challenges effectively.

For adolescents (12–18 years old) whose family return to Poland took place during their adolescence, the main problems were: lack of belonging and becoming a member of the school and peer group. They felt abandoned and lonely and needed a relatively long time to make friends in Poland, which was even lengthened by their lack of language and cultural background. In general, and in line with previous research (NíLaoire et al., 2011; Kathartzi, 2017; Vathi and Duhi, 2015), members pertaining to all groups (children, adolescents, parents and teachers) admitted that participants experienced discrimination because of their level of language (in)competence or any real or imagined "otherness".

As we can see, language plays very interesting role in the adaptation process. Even though the Polish language which children learned mostly at home or at Polish Saturday School represents a bridge between the old and new life, and purports to facilitate the integration process in the new country, in a new school and with school mates it sometimes in fact evokes discriminatory behavior due to the different accent or errors made. As the research shows, some children suffered as a result of their

incompetence in Polish, not only because of problems with the language of education but also from the reaction of their peers, which caused feelings of shame in a manner akin to that experienced by Albanian returning migrants (Vathi, Duci, 2015). In our case, adolescents who had spent the majority of their schoolyears in a different educational system suffered more as a result of these language imperfections (sometimes they felt ashamed when asked to read aloud during class or had to interpret a difficult poem) than children, who were able to catch up on the vocabulary related to the language of education in an easier way, together with the requisite cultural scripts (Jurek, 2015). On the other hand, as Ebata et al. (1996) claim, in cases where parents had taught the language and held positive opinions on Albania, the psychosocial consequences upon return to Albania were not severe.

Although extensive and complex, our research project still seems to be only a first step toward recognizing and describing the reality of migrant children and adolescents. Based on the already gathered data, we have formulated a list of recommendations for families (parents and children) concerning preparations for the return migration and the best strategies for coping with likely challenges during the first weeks or months after starting school in Poland. We also prepared a compendium of basic advice and further readings for teachers in order to help them to prepare for working with students who have different migration experiences but also about the ways of raising the awareness of host students about the needs of children with migration experiences and ways of preparing the host group to receive and welcome "newcomers" (both may be found in the final report from the project, Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). In this research project, which was the first dedicated to the functioning of children from return Polish families in the Polish school system, we found out that there are many topics which should be taken into consideration, both by parents when they are planning to migrate and by teachers when they welcome a student from a returning family. Undoubtedly, there is a great need for further, more specific and/or longitudinal research, both in the psychological and pedagogical arenas concerning the topic of school experiences and the mental health of children from returning families.

Best practices

As a postscript to the present paper, we decided provide a list of recommended practices that help migrant students adapt to their new environment:
– An introduction between new students and the group facilitated by the teacher
– involvement of other students in the welcoming process – peers can show the school to new students, prepare a map of the school or just be open to help and sensitive for new students' needs (the teacher can also try to provide workshops which raise intercultural sensitivity, developing empathy and tolerance rather than discriminatory behaviors and attitudes)

- sharing knowledge about school rules – they may be different than in other educational systems (for example: dress code, punctuality, eating and drinking during lessons or between them, communication with the teacher)
- giving children opportunities to share their unique knowledge gained abroad with the class, for example about the culture and foreign language
- asking discreetly whether a child understands the task, explaining the instruction in simpler terms when the child needs it, it is also recommended adjusting the tasks for children's needs
- before asking a child to read a text in public, it may be helpful to diagnose his/her reading skills to avoid uncomfortable situations for the child
- the recognition of passions or talents by teachers may be helpful in developing a child's strengths (this may be knowledge of a foreign language, knowledge about the migration country but also a musical talent, sport skills or specific interests in math, history, geography)
- keeping in close contact with the parents – they are the best source of information about their child

Endnotes

[1] Legal regulations can be found in: Rozdział 7 (art. 165 i 166) ustawy z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe (Dz.U. z 2017 r.poz.59); ROZPORZĄDZENIE MINISTRA EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ z dnia 3 sierpnia 2017 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie kształcenia osób niebędących obywatelami polskimi oraz osób będących obywatelami polskimi, które pobierały naukę w szkołach funkcjonujących w systemach oświaty innych państw (Dz.U. z 2017, r. poz.1655)

[2] The challenges are reported extensively in the project report (Grzymała-Moszczyńskai in., 2015).

[3] Polish original versions of each quotation are given in the footnotes as follows: To znaczy, był bardzo duży stres, tak jak się obawiałem, właśnie tym bardziej, że sam musiałem pójść na otwarcie, na pierwszy dzień, tak to pierwsze kilka tygodni, pierwszy miesiąc to było tak, sam sobie radziłem. [chłopiec, Niemcy, 15 lat]

[4] For each quotation we provide a brief characteristics of participant: sex, country the participant returned from and her age at the moment when the interview took place. For parents and teachers we provide data of their child/student.

[5] B [Badacz]: To powiedz mi, jak pamiętasz ten pierwszy dzień, jak przyszedłeś do szkoły?
R [Respondent]: Pani się spytała Kornela, mojego najlepszego przyjaciela, czy może mnie oprowadzić po klasie i tak dalej. No to on powiedział: „Tak" i stoję obok niego, i sobie gadamy, a potem przychodzi reszta dzieci. Fajnie było, trochę się wstydziłem. [chłopiec, Niemcy, 10 lat]

[6] R: Tak, tak, też się okazało, pani mi później powiedziała, że braki te były głównie, bo Łucja nie znała odpowiedników nazw po polsku, ona nie wiedziała, że odejmować to jest odejmować, ona zawsze miała less czy tam minus, no, więc jak już opanowała te rzeczy, to się okazało, że z matematyką świetnie sobie radzi, jedyny problem jest z zadaniami tekstowymi, gdzie na przykład nie rozumiała wyrazu i tak naprawdę to wychodzi do dziś. [matka, Wielka Brytania]

[7] Nie znała polskich znaczy liter, pisanych, prawda, drukowane znała, pisała literami drukowa-
nymi. Natomiast największym problemem były właśnie litery pisane, ponieważ my byliśmy już
po całym roku nauki pisania. Zarówno liter, jak i połączeń, kierunek pisania liter, to wszystko
miało ogromne znaczenie, bałyśmy się, jak sobie poradzi. [nauczycielka, Wielka Brytania]

[8] Na początku było trudno w szkole, bo tak, powiedzmy, że 75% to tylko rozumiałem, jak do
mnie mówili, a poza tym takie niektóre słówka nie znałem. Ale potem już, jak tak z miesiąc
pochodziłem, no to już było o wiele lepiej, rozumiałem większość. Już umiem troszkę czytać
i pisać. [chłopiec, Holandia, 17 lat]

[9] Ze szkołą, no, spadło na niego bardzo dużo, jednak całkiem inny system, dużo więcej
przedmiotów, dużo więcej wymagań, no i ta bariera językowa. O ile z takim porozumiewa-
niem się słownym nie miał problemu, tak z pisaniem i z czytaniem miał ogromne problemy,
zresztą do tej pory ma. Idzie mu dużo lepiej, ale do tej pory ma. (…) Miałam problemy ze
szkołą, ponieważ na samym początku zapewniano mnie, że dziecko, oczywiście, będzie
całkiem inaczej traktowane. My nawet zrobiliśmy tak, że wróciliśmy w kwietniu, więc ja się
dogadałam ze szkołą, żeby on przez te dwa miesiące też chodził i się przystosował do tego,
jaki jest system, jak to wygląda, zapoznał się z klasą, żeby potem w tej czwartej klasie, kiedy
dochodzą te dodatkowe przedmioty, żeby to nie było dla niego takie wielki bum: „Co ja
tutaj robię?". To zauważyli już właśnie wtedy, przez te dwa miesiące, że on ma problemy,
jednak sama pani dyrektor przyznała się do tego, że ona to zbagatelizowała, bo on był na
innych zasadach. No i w czwartej klasie zaczęły się duże problemy. No tak, czyli że też brak
takiego uwzględnienia, że jemu jest trudniej, na przykład, szybko coś przepisać i… (…). Tak.
No i że, na przykład, nie wiem, ta ortografia, gramatyka, to dla niego jest abstrakcja w tym
momencie, bo on się z czymś takim nie spotkał, jak ortografia i gramatyka, i on nie wie,
o co chodzi, i on potrzebuje dużo więcej czasu, żeby się tego wszystkiego nauczyć. [matka,
Wielka Brytania, 11 lat]

[10] Wiadomo, że to wszystko przez takie różnice edukacyjne, programowe itd. Ja uczę głównie
historii i widzę, że chłopiec ma niewystarczającą wiedzę z przedmiotu, dużo ma do nadra-
biania. I widzę, że to ciężka sytuacja, bo nie tylko z historią taka sytuacja wychodzi. W sensie
sytuacja różnicy programowej. [nauczycielka, Hiszpania, (75)]

[11] Najgorsza sprawa to były te ułamki. Ułamki, to było trudne... Po prostu... to, czego nie było
tam w szkole, a było już tutaj. Na pewno przyroda też była prosta, opracowywaliśmy takie
tematy, które ja już brałam, czyli w sumie, to było dla mnie tylko do powtórzenia i... plasty-
ka. I muzyka. Pierwsza lekcja historii – dodatkowa – mi się po prostu zaczęła od... historia
niby tej Polski, tego królestwa i tak dalej, A już na piątej lekcji miałam program do szóstej
klasy. To było już trochę trudne. I też w sumie to pomogło, już się nie przejmowałam tym.
[dziewczynka, Włochy, 12 lat, (55)]

[12] Ale nie wiem czy to ma bezpośredni związek z tym, że właśnie wyjeżdżała... znaczy potem
miała taki też problem, że jakoś bardzo uczniowie byli negatywnie do niej nastawieni, nie
do końca wiem dlaczego, też na początku ją przezywali – „Niemka, Niemka", ale to było tak
nacechowane, tak bardzo negatywnie. Ona bardzo to brała do siebie. W tym momencie,
no to już się w ogóle tym przezwiskiem nie przejmuje. [nauczyciel 15-letniej dziewczynki]

[13] Kiedy chodziłam do szkoły, nie podobało mi się zbyt. Dlatego, że wszyscy mnie wyzywali
„patrzcie, ta dziwna z Włoch przyszła". Wszyscy ode mnie uciekali i tylko takie… ta dziew-
czynka Wiktoria, to ona akurat… my się razem interesowałyśmy malowaniem i zwierzętami.
[dziewczynka, Włochy, 8 lat]

[14] B: A powiedz mi, a pomagasz kolegom czasem i koleżankom w klasie? R: W angielskim?
B: Tak. R: Yhym. B: Tak? A jak to robisz? Pani Cię prosi czy sam im pomagasz? R: Jak mnie
proszą, to im na przykład... często mnie taki jeden... no, to nie jest mój kolega, bo jego
przywitanie do mnie, to było kopnięcie mnie w brzuch. R: Jak przyszłem do szkoły pierwszy
dzień. B: A dlaczego on to zrobił? R: No, bo on jest taki, no właśnie, niedobry. B: A po-
wiedziałeś o tym Pani? R: Yhym. B: I co ona zrobiła? Powiedziała, że jeszcze raz tak zrobi,
a pójdzie do Pani dyrektorki, bo on już nie raz tak robił. [chłopiec, 9 lat]

[15] Początek był taki, że dzieci, ponieważ mowa jednak troszeczkę z tymi naleciałościami z języka
angielskiego była i taka trudność z tymi takimi sformułowaniami u nas typowymi: „proszę
pani”, „proszę pana”, tutaj wchodziła na „ty”, więc to dzieci troszeczkę śmieszyło, bo nie byli
do tego przyzwyczajeni. Ja sama byłam na początku taka troszkę skonsternowana, ale ona się
szybciutko nauczyła, że jednak u nas tak się mówi. [nauczycielka, Stany Zjednoczone, (64)]

[16] Były takie śmieszne sytuacje, bo w Szwajcarii jest tak, że jak się kończy lekcja i jak się żegna
z panią, to wszystkie dzieci po kolei podchodzą i podają rękę. I w ogóle dzieci podają rękę
dorosłemu przy witaniu i pożegnaniu, tutaj w Polsce jest zupełnie inaczej. I Franek wzbudzał
po prostu taką wesołość w szkole, bo on do pani w świetlicy „do widzenia”, „dzień dobry”
przychodził i on... Tak samo Julek, nie? I potem tak podchodził do pani i chował tą rękę, bo
„Aha! W Polsce się tego nie robi”. [matka, Szwajcaria, (18)]

[17] No to przyszliśmy do szkoły tam pierwszy dzień. Się dowiedziałam, że mundurki trzeba mieć
i w ogóle. W pierwszy dzień to chodziłam bez tego mundurka. I tak wszyscy widzieli, że
jestem nowa. I tam się wszyscy zebrali wokół mnie. I tak wszyscy mówili cześć, jestem to
i to. I tak dalej. [dziewczynka, Norwegia, 16 lat (59)]

[18] A ten błąd ortograficzny, od pierwszej klasy ogromny nacisk w Polsce, prawda, każdy błąd
jest podkreślany na czerwono, dzieci są uczone tego, żeby pisać mniej, ale bez błędów, błędy
są strasznie podkreślane, a w Anglii absolutnie, było na odwrót. [matka, Wielka Brytania]

[19] Pamiętam, że Staś moczył się w nocy. Lidka była niespokojna po powrocie do Polski. [matka,
UK, chłopiec 7 lat i dziewczynka 9 lat]

[20] Na początku to, wiesz, płakał, to znaczy, mówię, płakał w domu, bo też mi tam nauczy-
cielki nie zwracały uwagi, żeby w szkole. Ale w domu to mówię ci, tragedia czasem była.
Przed wyjściem do szkoły. To już jak młodszy był, to takich płaczów nie odstawiał. No, ale
to w domu. W szkole to, jak wiem, był taki cichutki, wiesz taki z boku. To też inaczej niż
w tamtej szkole, no ale tam miał kolegów, a tutaj nikogo nie znał. [matka, Wielka Brytania]

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