



(In)visible learners or school as a space for negotiating integration? Challenges of working with migrant children through the lens of teachers

Abstract: Poland has been becoming a migrant country over the past years, experiencing recently increased visibility of migrant children at schools. At the same time, the issue of their support and integration remains on the margin of educational policy and depends on the activity of local authorities and, above all, of school head-teachers and teachers. Drawing on the qualitative study carried out in 2020 within the project CHILD-UP Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation (Horizon 2020) in schools in Kraków and South-East Poland (where one of the centres for foreigners is located), this article comprises a discussion on the extent to which Polish schools are ready to accept migrant (including refugee) children, to enhance their agency and support integration processes. Therefore, it raises a question whether schools are able to effectively support migrant children linguistically as well as help them enter into peer groups in the course of their educational activities.

Keywords: migrant children, educational system, agency, teachers

Introduction

Although the presence of migrant children in Polish schools is not a new phenomenon, its dynamics has changed significantly over the years. For the last several years there has been a systematic influx of the children of labour migrants, resulting from a change in individual migration patterns towards family arrivals. Moreover, migrant children are dispersed throughout the country. However, even a small number of migrant children in a homogenous class changes the structure of the class, triggering new phenomena and new school

processes. In educational policy, the notion of “intercultural education” has shifted the focus towards changing the learning environment so it could better respond to the needs of students and increase their participation in the learning process. Such a process is reflected to some extent in the general policies within which new programmes, measures, and tools can be offered, but the adjustment of school itself happens through the everyday work of teachers; this forms the main issue to be addressed in this article. Our focus is on challenges faced by Polish teachers in their everyday work with migrant (included refugee) children and the strategies they have developed to cope with them.

In particular, our intention was to examine whether these strategies reinforce the “othering” of migrant children or lead to their integration. Integration at school is defined here as more than a concept of passive assimilation or simple adaptation to the existing socio-cultural context (Ager and Strang, 2008) but rather children’s active participation in negotiating their identity in the sense of combining culture of their country of origin with the culture of the host society. Specifically, our focus is on the question of whether the daily task of teaching is seen solely as having to cope with the challenges of teaching migrant children – thus problematizing such children – or whether it also leads to the empowerment of migrant children and enhances their sense of agency (Baraldi and Iervese, 2014). The latter can change the culture of school in the way Ainscow (2006) defines it: from a concern for the well-being of the general public and a separate concern for children with ‘special educational needs,’ to a concern for the preparation of the school to accommodate pupils with diverse needs, thus creating a ‘school for all’.

The article is based on the qualitative part of the H2020 project *Child-Up: Children Hybrid Integration Learning Dialogue as a Way of Upgrading Policies of Participation*¹ (2018–2022). Through the interviews with the teachers, personal experiences were explored of working with migrant children, their daily routine in the classroom, the strategies they adopted to support migrant children, and how they recognised (or not) the children’s agency by strengthening their ability to cope with everyday challenges. Moreover, some questions were asked about the school as an institution and its integration framework, cooperation with parents and peer relations in the classroom. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted remotely, over the phone or using web-based applications. 18 semi-structured interviews

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were conducted, eight of them with teachers in the schools in South-East (SE) Poland attended by refugee children, and ten in Kraków schools, where children of economic migrants predominate. The analysis of the interviews was based on analytical grids and open coding, which were used to create a categorisation scheme in the thematic analysis (Wengraf, 2001).

Migrant children, teachers, and schools – framing the issue

Before considering how Polish teachers perceive migrant children, it is necessary to place this issue in the broader social context. Following Mikołaj Pawlak (2013), the notion of the so-called refugee field can be applied here, in which the educational system, with its complex legal and institutional context, different actors and connections to other public and nonpublic institutions, influences the situation of migrant children and, more broadly, their integration into the Polish society. It is in this field that the processes occur shaping an intercultural school that is either open or closed to the “other child” (Januszewska, 2017; Januszewska and Markowska-Manista, 2017; Kościółek, 2020). Teachers are an important element within this field: fundamental actors of change, they strengthen migrant children and work towards building their agency (Bulandra et al., 2019). What seems equally important is the teaching environment. Kościółek (2020) emphasises that system’s premise is inclusiveness, which leads to the so-called ‘one path’ (Bąbka and Nowicka, 2017) or ‘integration’ model (Todorovska-Sokolovska, 2010). It was only in 2017 that Polish law introduced the possibility of establishing the so-called “welcome classes” designed for migrant children, in which they would stay for a certain period to receive intensive language instruction.

The openness of the Polish educational system to “otherness” and intercultural dialogue has been also examined by intercultural educationalists (Januszewska, Markowska-Manista, 2017, Nikitorowicz, 2018), intercultural psychologists (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1998) or intercultural sociologists and anthropologists (Nowicka and Pawlak, 2013). The picture emerging from these studies presents the Polish educational system in a rather negative light, highlighting that “a foreign student is still ‘being recognized’ rather than ‘recognized’” (Herudzińska, 2018, p. 206; NIK report, 2020). Among the most frequently identified challenges, teachers point to the language barrier and the organisation of additional Polish language classes, the lack of the competences required for teaching migrant children, the psychological problems exhibited by foreign students, intercultural differences or the legal

obstacles that prevent or delay support from being obtained (Herudzińska, 2018). Classroom relationships are also essential. In this context teachers often point to communication problems, conflicts relating to cultural differences or the lack of acceptance of migrant children within the peer group. Other studies (Bulandra et al., 2019) show that the educational system only supports children's agency to a limited extent. Among the biggest obstacles to the process of integrating migrant children are symbolic violence and activities that could be called assimilationist rather than integrative. In schools, there is a tendency to stereotype migrant children and even to "exoticize" them, to highlight single, clearly problematic cases. This is especially true in the case of refugee children – due to, for example, a different religion, or a cultural context regarded as distant. At the same time, some children successfully become "invisible" at school by using mechanisms to veil their immigrant status since they are white, come from countries culturally close to Poland, and can understand cultural differences.

It is important that the majority of the existing research focuses on teachers working with refugee children, especially those from Chechnya; therefore, the work and challenges concerning that category of children who are particularly visible (Januszewska, 2017). Experiences in working with those children are often generalised to other categories of migrant children and form the basis for the development of our recommendations. Much less studied in the literature is the specific nature of work with the children of economic migrants coming from countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, who in recent years are increasingly visible in Polish schools.

Daily work challenges and coping strategies

One of the recurrent themes – in our study as well as in other studies cited in the previous section – is the impact of the lack of proficiency in the language of instruction on the inclusion of migrant children in the classroom. Almost all of the teachers emphasized that being unable to speak the language of instruction at the school affects migrant children's participation in the class, their performance at school, their self-esteem, and feeling of being left out. Yet, the difficulties caused by an inadequate level of proficiency in Polish were of varying degrees, being most profoundly experienced by two categories of migrants: children whose mother tongue does not belong to Slavic languages and therefore lacks similarities with Polish languages and older learners (5–8 grade) who were not offered a proper language training

before starting their school in Poland. The language barrier was especially problematic for teachers of subjects requiring specific terms (such as biology or physics), requiring linguistic skills (such as the interpretation of a poem) or those responsible for the preparation for the 8th-grade exam. Recognizing the negative consequences of low degree of language proficiency, teachers considered teaching the language of instruction in the second language as essential. Although this measure is highly evaluated, teachers also mentioned their individualized strategies such as communicating in migrant children languages (mostly in the case of refugee children, i.e. in Russian) or in English (mostly in the case of migrant children).

Another commonly identified challenge concerns cultural and religious differences. Teachers of refugee children often referred to differences in value of education which is not of high importance for their parents. Consequently, parents are neither interested in providing high-quality educational opportunities for their children nor in developing their educational aspirations and interests. There was also a strong sense among teachers of children from cultures based on a clear division of gender roles embedded in patriarchal relations of power that the cultural and religious constraints have stronger impact on girls' educational paths. They are expected to express greater involvement in home duties and care work and become a wife and a mother. There are also many challenges for children from distinct cultures to participate in classes such as "Biology", "Family Life Education" 1 or PE during the Ramadan:

They asked me: "Family Life Education" – What is this subject about?" I explained to them: It is a subject about family, similar to biology. They participated in few classes. Probably told their parents at home what topics were discussed during lessons. Their parents did not let them go there again. At that time they had biology about a female body (...) 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: "It's a shame if you don't have knowledge. If you don't study and learn". The parents were outraged. They did not want their children to participate in biology classes. We explained them that those topics are obligatory in the syllabus. (Female teacher, South-East Poland)

The example above illustrates the tensions between the cultural expectations of parents and the teacher, and the school's expectation that the curriculum is followed. It also raises the question concerning the acceptance of

differences. For some, encouraging migrant students to attend classes which are not in accordance with their culture or religion is contradictory to inclusive education and indicates a lack of cultural awareness. For others, it may be a way of dealing with parents' lack of knowledge about the educational system and the curriculum. It is also a question of implementing formally empowered authority (the argument of implementation of the core curriculum) or jointly finding solutions that recognize cultural differences and respect certain values.

To better recognize migrant children's needs, some schools/teachers decided to adjust educational programmes to migrant children's knowledge, adapt textbook and prepare extra materials, alter the grading system to formative assessment to recognize not only the evaluation of children's cognitive skills but also their engagement in classes. Although all children can benefit from these changes, they are mostly offered to migrant children from linguistically and culturally distinct countries, making the needs of children from neighbouring countries neither acknowledged nor recognized:

We have adopted this principle that we appreciate the efforts [in learning]. (...) A 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!
(Female teacher, South-East Poland)

Moreover, teachers referred to a need to find interactive participatory methods to activate pupils. Of high importance was also the issue of the accessibility of classes by taking into account the religious and cultural holidays which prevent them from participation in lessons. During this time, as one teacher admits, "*Classes are simply suspended, they have their holidays and they celebrate*".

Recognition of agency?

The literature on the agency of migrant children (Thompson et al., 2019) reflects a dichotomy present in popular discourse: children from migrant backgrounds are seen either as victims (deprived of self-determination, forced to migrate) or as criminals (unlawful agents, most often about unaccompanied migrants). This approach emphasises either the vulnerability of migrant children or the challenge of child migration for the host country by extending the school environment. Such an approach may lead to the complexity of

migrant children's agency being overlooked, and in particular, the nuanced and diverse expressions of subjectivity, and the multiplicity of experiences young migrants find themselves in. Therefore, in the following analysis, we go beyond this binary model, drawing attention to those situations that were not necessarily interpreted as expressions of children's agency by our interlocutors, but which demonstrate how the Polish school constructs students' subjectivity.

The collected material illustrates three distinct contexts in which children's subjectivity and decision-making become the direct or indirect subject of teachers' reflections. The first context unfolds when teachers perceive children's agency as important e.g. in the construction of new forms of communication, something that is crucial for the development and maintenance of peer relationships. This area was the least frequently mentioned during the interviews and usually applies to migrant children from neighbouring countries. One example was given by a teacher of English who talked about her students in this way, noting that children, on their initiative, had installed and used apps to communicate with a student who does not speak Polish:

Our kids have launched all these different translators and applications. They launched the translators and applications because they were then able to talk on the phone and explained that they were talking to her. They looked after her very well. (Female teacher, Kraków).

In this context, the teachers also mention extra-curricular activities, willingly initiated by migrant students, making friends or participating in daily school activities. What distinguishes this context from others is the emphasis on the bottom-up, unforced initiative of the migrant students and non-migrant students. This is also the case in the following example, which demonstrates a migrant boy's initiative in making friends with other boys by talking about the war in Ukraine:

I have a boy in the fifth grade, and (...) I forget that he is in the class, he has integrated with the children so well. He immediately won the sympathy of the boys, because he talked a lot about the war. Everything was about shooting, all the drawings were about war, because it was the time of the aggression in Crimea. (...) This influenced the sympathy of the boys, who accepted him with all his military ideas. (Female teacher, Kraków).

The second context refers to the situation in which the teachers emphasize the competence, skills, and abilities of migrant children, indirectly indicating their agency in shaping their educational path. The interviewees point

to the high level of peer and social integration, the cooperation between the children, and the involvement of migrant students in school activities:

They [a girl and a boy attending the 2nd-grade class the respondent teaches – authors] spend time more with Polish children, here at school. M. has a friend ... S. gets involved in the boys' games and is very popular (Female teacher, Kraków).

However, there are many references to migrant students having to be persuaded by a teacher to, e.g. take part in a game or a school festival. Then the migrant pupil is portrayed as “active,” “involved,” friendly, and open. This is especially evident when working with refugee children whose cultural “otherness” is further emphasized. The following quote illustrates this:

We had some preparation for the teachers' day and we danced a Belgian dance. One girl refused to shake a boy's hand. I started talking to her, I showed her videos that in other dances you can touch each other and nobody gets hurt. I told her: “Here, the boys won't hurt you either. Just put your hand closer to his hand.” And she tried. The dance turned out very nice (Female teacher, South-East Poland).

Agency is thus seen here as conforming to the teacher's expectations, accepting the teacher's vision of the student's role. The opposite situation rarely occurs – in the situation when it is the migrant student who takes the initiative, and their idea is recognised by the teacher. It can be assumed that this is a conditional recognition of agency – if migrant students fit into the roles provided by the school system, their agency will be recognised. The greater the refusal to participate (and at the same time the pressure to take part) is based on gender, cultural, or religious differences, the more problematic such situations become.

The last context refers to peer group conflicts. The teachers most often refer to the initial difficulties that all students experience when they welcome students with a migrant background into their class. In this context, anger, frustration, aggression, and mutual misunderstanding are mentioned. This is illustrated by the statement of one teacher working primarily with refugee children:

For our Polish children, in the beginning, the lack of information [about the foreign children] resulted in a certain distancing. They [refugee children] in the beginning reacted aggressively to the type of trick, even though it was nothing like that, but they felt bad, insecure, and so they reacted accordingly. However, with time our children learned to treat

them normally. (...) The fact that their culture was brought closer to them made the children accept this situation (Female teacher, South-East Poland).

A simple expression of anger or unwillingness to participate in certain school activities is hardly ever interpreted as an expression of the child's agency in conscious refusing to participate in the activity. This is particularly evident in narratives referring to refugee children, children from a distant cultural context, or those with very poor Polish language skills. The example below that is related to a migrant student illustrates this way of perceiving a child's agency. Her means of communication – refusal, anger, or jokes – are not perceived by the teacher as an expression of subjectivity, but rather as an expression of character and difficulty resulting from the lack of language skills.

I would rather say that this is about her character, our girl [from a Sub Saharan African country] is very stubborn, and she can argue with me and sometimes she has to be brought down to earth, so that she doesn't argue with the teacher (...). She is a maturing girl, I said that this is not the way we talk, that it's not polite to take offence at the teacher like that (...). She gets upset. I suspect that it results from the language barrier. The Ukrainians do not have a barrier to the same extent (Female teacher, Kraków).

While recognizing children's agency as a key aspect in the shaping of integration policies at the school level, it is worth noting that the three contexts of children's agency discussed above illustrate the experiences of different categories of migrant children; children with a good knowledge of Polish and those just learning the basics of the language; boys and girls; and younger and older children. Teachers' understanding of child agency suggests that empowering children is not a priority in Polish schools. School still rather promotes a sense of 'conforming' to the rules. It can be seen that this applies to all students, but in the case of migrant children it may be further reinforced by the belief that following the rules will make it easier for them to integrate into their new environment – although it would be more correct to call these activities assimilationist (cf. Favell, 2008).

Discussion and conclusions

When migrant children become learners, schools need to adapt their policies and teaching models. Our study illustrates two types of approaches: address-

ing linguistic and cultural diversity to fill in the gaps in children's knowledge and skills and the whole-child approach. Both approaches are embedded in a framework of national regulations. Yet, the former is developed to a great extent as the top-level strategy that aims at enabling children to take part in school activities up to a point where the learning support provided by school does not require changing the system (e.g. relations between school and parents) and does not have to be addressed. The whole-child approach is mostly a result of individual approaches developed by teachers who have noted the challenges of migrant children, in particular from distinct cultures and religions, and developed their own initiatives/strategies to better integrate children in the educational system. In this context, workshops and training on cultural diversity for teachers are pivotal. They give a possibility to exchange knowledge, discuss challenges and learn about new methods which can be applied during classes. Our study has therefore shown that adopting school and educational programmes rely not only on governance framework and legislation, but also on individual agency of teachers and schools.

The interviews with teachers reveal that migrant pupils' agency, their involvement in school life and their ability to make autonomous decisions are relatively rarely directly reflected upon. Teachers are more likely to talk about children's different behaviours and the degree of how strongly they are 'integrated' into the school environment, but less likely to analyze various school situations through the lens of agency. Most interviewees rather pointed to the roles performed in school relationships, highlighting the better or worse "adjustment" of pupils to educational requirements, the expected level of involvement and participation in peer relationships. Yet, our study contributes to the understanding of children's agency by exploring various contexts in which migrant children's agency might be further developed. Their approach seems to be "one-way"; they evaluate – often very positively – to what extent migrant children can find their way in the system, but there is little reflection on the extent to which the school could change because of their presence. The children agency is valued and recognised especially when it fills in the gaps in the support provided by schools or if it is expressed in accordance to teacher's definition of agency, leaving no space for the forms of agency that are more difficult to accept.

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