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Adjusting the Teaching Process for Refugee Students from Ukraine. The Perspective of Polish Teachers

Abstract

Teaching refugee students in inclusive classrooms is challenging for Polish teachers as the number of these students in schools has dramatically increased. This research aimed to explore Polish teachers' experiences with adapting their teaching process for these students. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used, and 30 teachers participated in six focus group interviews. Two themes were identified in the analysis: 1) collaboration with others, 2) essential elements of direct work with students: communication; didactic aids; teaching methods; learning content; and learning objectives. Several recommendations for teaching practice are made.

Keywords: *adjusting, teaching methods, refugee students, education, teachers*

Introduction

Millions of Ukrainians came to the European Union due to the armed conflict in their country (*Supporting the inclusion…*, 2022). Poland was the leader among many countries offering help and support to refugees. Polish borders were crossed by over 6 million Ukrainians, mainly children, youth, and women. The prolonged

armed conflict forced the Polish government to guarantee long-term support to refugees in education and childcare. The Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of 21 March 2022 introduced detailed guidelines on the organisation of education. Teachers faced new tasks related to providing these students with psychological and pedagogical support and overcoming language and cultural barriers (Tędziagolska et al., 2022). The effectiveness of including children with various special needs and their adaptation depends on numerous factors, among which a vital role is ascribed to school climate and teachers' attitudes and practices (Biasutti et al., 2020; Gaintza et al., 2018; Makarova et al., 2019; Verger et al., 2020).

When a foreign student enters another educational system, the first thing to do is to ensure safety, stability, and respect for their needs, including their cultural needs. Empathy and the ability to organise support using the resources of the class, school, and the local environment are crucial (Biasutti et al., 2020). Teachers also need the competencies to activate the students' potential by including them in all forms of social activity (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). Creative and constructivist methods are useful for implementing this task since they create openness to communicate and share personal experiences, which is not always possible using language (Makarova et al., 2019). Considering the students' negative experiences, focusing on their strengths and resilience becomes important, which counterbalances treating them only as victims (the deficit model) (McDiarmid et al., 2022).

Although the literature largely addresses the problems of education and social and educational integration of migrant and refugee children and youth, it is not possible to fully transfer the conclusions described there to the current situation in Poland or other countries that have welcomed Ukrainians. This situation is specific for several reasons: 1) lack of a common language (students coming to English-speaking countries often know at least the basics of this language); 2) more favourable conditions for environmental adaptation (no camps, the Ukrainian community was accepted into Polish homes); 3) no efforts to obtain permanent residence, and in many cases awaiting return. This specificity justifies the need to conduct research in Polish conditions.

Aim

This research aimed to explore Polish teachers' experiences with teaching refugee students from Ukraine and the meaning they found in these experiences.

Research Methodology

General Research Background

An interpretive phenomenological framework (Love et al., 2020), which focuses on the day-to-day experiences of the participants and the meanings ascribed to these experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019), was used in this study. This approach allows the researcher to remain open to the meanings that emerge in the research (Gauci, 2019).

Instrument and Procedures

Data were collected using focus interviews (Barbour, 2018). The combination of interpretive phenomenology and focus groups is recommended by Sim and Waterfield (2019).

Data Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data (Gauci, 2019). The analysis was conducted according to the stages recommended by Gauci (2019): repeated reading and note-taking; transforming notes into emergent themes; searching for relationships and grouping themes; and writing the report. The research project received positive ethical approval from The Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland (9/2022), .

Sampling, Recruitment, and Participants

The sampling was purposive. The selection criteria were: being a teacher in one of five randomly selected schools with Ukrainian students in Warmian-Mazurian Province in Poland, having the experience of working with refugee children from Ukraine, and giving informed consent to participate in the study.

Thirty participants (28 women and 2 men) aged 25–60 participated in this study. The duration of the respondents' work experience at school ranged from 1 year to 37 years. 10 teachers taught humanities, 9 mathematics and natural sciences, 2 arts, 2 physical education, and 3 early childhood education, 4 teachers graduated in different fields of study and taught different subjects. All participants taught Ukrainian students.

Research Results

Participants focused on two main themes: (1) collaboration with others, (2) essential elements of direct work with students: communication; didactic aids; teaching methods; teaching content; and teaching objectives (statements were marked with the number of the focus interview, e.g., f1 and the number of the interviewee).

1) Collaboration with others

Teachers talked about using other people's knowledge (including training), sharing knowledge with others, and sharing responsibility when undertaking joint activities. It can be illustrated by the following statements:

Before these students came to us, we already had some training, but after that we started looking for ways of working on our own. We learn Ukrainian a bit, we search for materials ourselves. (f3,4)

There was one such good training – where to find materials, about regulations, some interesting websites were shown. (f6,3)

Some teachers participated in courses on improving work with students from Ukraine, and some received specific tips on improving their work and where to look for teaching aids. The topic of cooperation also concerned the joint organisation of classes (e.g., with the participation of a co-organising teacher, or a translator) or sharing knowledge and experience with those who run parallel groups in the same school.

2) Direct work with students

The other main theme is the essential elements of direct work with students. Here, the statements were very diverse and concerned several of the mentioned subthemes.

a. Communication

Communication was perceived as a fundamental element in education. It was also the first barrier faced by teachers as it effectively hindered taking up typical educational activities. This subtheme was presented very broadly during the interviews. Teachers experienced: personal attempts to establish contact with the new students; the use of translators; the use of other languages to connect with students; cooperation with translators (often not necessarily educated in this profession, but just speakers of Polish and Ukrainian).

Below are examples of statements that illustrate the effort undertaken by the surveyed teachers:

I translated from Polish into Ukrainian using one translator, then from this translator back into Polish — the output was total nonsense. I showed it to the kids, and they laughed. (f2,5)

There was an attitude that it was better not to use Russian. I tried to avoid it because I didn't want to annoy them. (f5,4)

b. Didactic aids

Due to communication problems with students from Ukraine, teachers needed to use various teaching aids. These included aids used on a daily basis to work with Polish students (e.g., models, kits for experiments, and hands-on activities or worksheets) and aids created specifically for students from Ukraine. In the latter case, simplified worksheets in Polish and Ukrainian and texts in Ukrainian were discussed (sometimes with simultaneous access to both the Polish and the Ukrainian versions of the text). Here is an example excerpt:

They had simpler cards and some crossword puzzles, so that they were able to do it. (f1,1)

c. Teaching methods

An important issue that teachers highlighted was the atmosphere and comfort of work. Working with students from Ukraine, teachers cared about their well-being. They talked about taking care of comfort and atmosphere in three groups: among students from Ukraine, among all students (from Ukraine and Poland), and other teachers, as well as in the entire school space. One participant reported,

During the first lessons, the first meeting, there were headmasters and a school psychologist, and they [students] *came with their parents, and I think they felt good about seeing other people from Ukraine.* (f6, 4).

One school practised strengthening the care of new pupils by pupils from Ukraine who moved to Poland before the war. Integration with students from Poland depended on the situation at school. If preparatory classes were organised, students from Ukraine became more friendly with each other, which sometimes made them reluctant to make acquaintance with students from Poland. On the other hand, if students were immediately included in classes in which Polish

students showed a good attitude towards them and were prepared to accept them, integration took place much faster. Integration with teachers was mainly about showing they were friendly towards the new students. These were non-verbal and verbal behaviours, for example, using the Ukrainian language.

Teachers usually took care of a good atmosphere by giving space for the use of the Ukrainian language in common spaces like school notice boards:

The class welcomed him very enthusiastically. (f1,5)
*I often visit them during breaks or after my lessons. Well, I already know my students
(…) I try to create a warm, good atmosphere for them.* (f3,2)
*When we make some posters, we have them in Polish, and the Ukrainian preparatory
classes prepare theirs in Ukrainian and we put up both.* (f5, 5)

Teachers also talked about the need for positive reinforcement and enabling students to experience success:

*…he seems to have already come to us with such school phobia, so every day he would
appear in class was already a success, and we had to praise him.* (f6,3)
I prepared and ran very easy tests. (f1,3)

In terms of the methods used, participants most emphasised: creating a favourable atmosphere, enabling success, and allowing being active (especially when interacting with Polish students). It was achieved through learning through experiments, group activity and collaboration.

[When the student] *can touch, then there is fascination.* (f2,1)
*The best solution for them was to work in groups and somewhere put them individually
together with Polish students. Then, this work was most effective*. (f1,3)

d. Learning Content
This topic proved to be important for several reasons: 1) the mismatch of the teaching content due to the flawed recruitment process of Ukrainian students, 2) the differences in the scope of their knowledge compared to their Polish peers, 3) the lack of programmes that consider the transition of students from a different educational system, 4) difficult content such as topics on war, 5) controversial topics, such as the Polish-Ukrainian relations over the centuries:

If there is a boy in a high school class, and before he was in the 8ᵗʰ grade, or learned some profession, he is not interested in it at all. (f4,4)
They see history differently. The Poles were not positively presented to them at all. (f5,2)

The analysed situations show that if teachers are not prepared beforehand, difficulties arise related to including Ukrainian students in the educational process.

e. Learning objectives
In their statements, teachers included the goals they set for themselves at the beginning and later stages of their work with Ukrainian students. The first statement is typical for a teacher just starting to work with these students, while the second is about a later stage of work (after about 3 months):

It is difficult to require children to know the Polish language, Polish history (...) here. It was necessary to take care of these children and not feed them with information. (f1,1)
Now I'm trying to slowly implement different elements so that they learn anything. (f2,2)

The teachers' initial work considered the Ukrainian students' special situation. Many teachers emphasised their precarious life situation. At the time, work with the students consisted of making them comfortable, helping them acclimate, and integrating them into the class and school life relatively gently. Over time, the goals began to change under the influence of legal requirements (the need to give students grades) and pressure from Polish students, who were not that eager to see their Ukrainian peers given special treatment.

Discussion

The current study shows that including refugee students was challenging for Polish teachers. The sudden influx of such students required teachers to look for different solutions. What worked well at that time was cooperation with others. It included sharing experiences with teachers working in the same school (exchanging information on didactic methods, communication, and working with refugee students) and participating in various training sessions organised by schools and online. The online ones were growing in number over time, and teachers sought them out on their own. Collaboration among teachers was perceived as important because they were not prepared to teach refugee students, had insufficient skills to communicate

with them, set reasonable goals, and individualise instructions. Thanks to this collaboration and their own, often creative, explorations, teachers were able to adapt new, more effective teaching strategies, set appropriate goals, and provide some basic modifications to their teaching. Other researchers (e.g., Levi, 2019; McDiarmid et al., 2022) report a similar trend, indicating insufficient preparation of teachers to work with refugee students. In such a situation, cooperation with other teachers and specialists, general pedagogical competencies and experience prove crucial (Makarova et al., 2019; Prentice & Ott, 2021; Serin & Bozdag, 2020). In our research, teachers felt they had to focus on students' needs for safety and appreciation. Given the students' traumatic experiences, realising these needs is crucial (Gudovitch et al., 2021; Thomas, 2016). Later, acquiring knowledge and skills also became significant. They tried various teaching methods and organisational forms to make these students master the content. According to participants, the richness of the teaching methods they use can make students learn new skills more easily. It also seemed clear that various approaches to teaching styles enable students – regardless of their ability – to engage their preferred learning styles: visual, auditory, reading and writing, or kinaesthetic. By giving students various options, teachers allowed them to observe, discuss, participate in group activities (e.g., sharing data and ideas), create websites, do hands-on activities, and reflect. Activities undertaken by teachers confirm their competence to recognise refugee students' special educational needs, which is considered an important aspect of their role (Bešić et al., 2020).

Participants reported that some effective teaching methods and forms for refugee students included cooperative learning, experiments (inquiry-based learning), and reading with translating. The benefits of some of these methods are widely described in the literature. For example, when students work in small groups to help each other learn, cooperative learning is believed to have the potential to become a primary format teachers use to achieve both traditional and innovative goals (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020). Students are not grouped based on their ability. Instead, they come from all levels. Students are expected to complete the assigned tasks together. This model enables students to maximise their own and each other's learning (Bećirović et al., 2022). Teachers' experiences show that a student-centred approach and cooperative learning are useful for integrating the class and promoting interpersonal contact (Biasutti et al., 2020). In turn, inquiry-based learning, which involves problem-solving, is student-centred and helps pupils improve their skills of observing, measuring, classifying, hypothesising, engaging in a controlled investigation, predicting, explaining, and communicating (Wale & Bishaw, 2020). It also promotes cooperative learning among students from different ability groups in a class (Ferguson & Patrick, 2020). The teachers could not limit themselves to using

attractive and activating methods for all students. In some cases, as Makarova et al. (2019) described, it was necessary to be creative and look for non-standard methods to cope with problems teachers had not encountered before. For example, since students did not know Polish, teachers needed to look for text translations and show students presentations in Polish and Ukrainian.

The theme of interculturalism, extensively discussed in the literature (Biasutti et al., 2020; Makarova et al., 2019), did not appear in our research. According to other Polish studies, there is a prevailing belief among teachers that the two cultures are similar, which does not align with the needs and beliefs of Ukrainian students themselves (Tędziagolska et al., 2022). In our research, however, there was the theme of a common history, which, as the teachers indicated, is portrayed differently in Poland and Ukraine.

Conclusions

On the one hand, the current study shows teachers' creativity, which sometimes translates into enrichment and success. On the other hand, it also presents drawbacks of the school system that was not prepared for many refugee students and teachers experiencing various difficulties at work. Listening to these teachers' day-to-day experiences is an indispensable part of improving refugee students' education quality.

Strengths and Future Directions

An important strength of the current study is that it highlights the importance and value of teachers' input while adapting Ukrainian refugee children to a new educational system. Teachers' perceptions of this process provide valuable insights into the literature on adapting the educational environment for refugee children. It includes information about how teachers navigate the dissonance between societal expectations, their professional expertise and individual experiences, and beliefs about other cultures. Based on the findings, we make the following recommendations:

- training school principals on diversity management;
- developing procedures for cooperation with parents of foreign students;
- substantive and emotional support for teachers;
- adapting teaching methods (e.g., use of demonstrations and group work) and requirements to students' current knowledge;

- developing aids to facilitate teaching with non-Polish students (e.g., visual aids, mini-dictionaries, diagrams);
- integrating refugee and Polish students, for instance, by organising peer mentoring;
- nurturing a favourable atmosphere for learning in the classroom and at school.

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