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# **Education of Children with a Refugee Background in Poland in the Situation of War in Ukraine. Outline of the Problems**

## **Abstract**

In the context of the military conflict in Ukraine, since February 24, 2022, the Polish government has decided to include refugee children in the continuation and implementation of education in the Polish education system at various stages and levels of education. Educational institutions in Poland have faced the great challenge of accepting refugee children into the Polish education system. Due to the war situation, both children with a refugee background and their guardians (mothers), as well as teachers, were confronted with the reality that showed many aspects of education and the implementation of the didactic process in a situation hitherto unknown and unexpected. The article aims to provide a preliminary diagnosis of the education process of children with a refugee background from the perspective of teachers and institutional support. In addition, the analysis also attempted to assess the health and mental well-being of children with experience of war trauma. Critical reflection on the education process of refugee children in Poland is based on available reports and studies of quantitative and qualitative research carried out primarily by public institutions (Polish Ministry of Education and Science, UNHCR, Integrated Educational Platform) and the private sector (Centre for Citizenship Education 2022–2023).

## **Keywords:**

children, migration, refugees, educational process, Ukraine, problems

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Students have the right to ask questions, feel lost and seek support at school in order to find answers to them. The school can play a crucial role in explaining these regional and global interdependencies and showing the consequences we are already facing or potentially will face in a moment. It is worth creating an appropriate atmosphere that supports integration and enables education for all students – regardless of their origin, nationality and level of knowledge of the Polish language. For the school to have a climate conducive to integration, all students should be involved in getting to know the cultures of different countries and have the opportunity to develop intercultural competence.

The situation of war put schools in front of completely new challenges. It was in schools that the first stage of the allocation of refugee families, mainly mothers and children, was often held. The article aims to verify the following research hypotheses based on selected statistical reports and qualitative research carried out in Polish schools in 2022–2023:

1. The school has become a central place where children and their careers could receive support in various areas (procedures for obtaining refugee status), but above all, as a place to receive psychological support. School and school environment (colleagues from Poland helped to minimise the effects of trauma and acculturation stress to a large extent (Hicks et al., 1993; Boothby, 1991) in refugee children.
2. School and teachers faced a new challenge of teaching children with a refugee background. Particular difficulties are language competencies. Not every school had the opportunity to employ translators or teachers with knowledge of the Ukrainian language. The didactic process was hampered by comments on formal legal provisions and the lack of legal procedures due to shortcomings in teachers' competencies. Teachers showed above-average creativity in conveying the teaching content in a language other than Polish. Despite the lack of organisational preparation in schools, the competencies and attitudes of teachers proved to be effective in obtaining positive results in the education of refugee children.

The article attempts to show the problems Polish schools face in educating children with refugee backgrounds. To verify the research hypotheses, the structure of the article was presented from several perspectives:

- a. Psychological perspectives – the situation of refugee children
- b. Institutional Perspective
- c. Teachers' perspectives

The main problem addressed in the title of the study concerns the analysis of the education process of children with a refugee background in Poland after the outbreak of the war conflict in Ukraine. The specific problems concern the description and analysis of the mental condition and mental health of children with a refugee background, as well as the opinions of teachers working with refugee children regarding the support they received or did not receive from government institutions.

The research method used in the article is mainly based on the analysis of existing data, mainly reports and data prepared by government institutions (Polish Ministry of Education and Science, UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency Poland Statistic, Integrated Educational Platform) and the private sector (Centre for Citizenship Education 2022–2023). This method allowed for critical reflection on the collected empirical material. In addition, the reflection indicates the need for further diagnoses and recommendations based on in-depth analysis of statistical data and qualitative research. Conducting a systematic analysis will allow for a deeper understanding of the problems, methods and tools, and support from various environments in educating children with a refugee background in Poland.

## **2. LEGAL SITUATION AND NUMBER OF REFUGEE CHILDREN IN POLAND**

The Geneva Convention governs legal issues. Refugee is a term regulated in both international and state legal acts. According to the Geneva Convention, the basic document dealing with refugee issues – a refugee is a person “who, as a result of a justified fear of persecution because of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a specific social group or because of political beliefs, resides outside the borders of the country of which he is a citizen and cannot or does not want to benefit from the protection of that country because of these fears (UN Convention of 26 July 1951 relating to the Status of Refugees). The document defining the refugee status in Poland is the Act of 13 June 2003 on granting protection to foreigners in the territory of the Republic of Poland. In addition to the refugee status, it is possible to obtain international subsidiary protection or a national form of protection of a humanitarian nature, i.e., the so-called tolerated residence permit.

There is no rule on the refugee status of minors in the 1951 Convention. The same definition of a refugee applies to all persons, regardless of age. Determining the refugee status of a minor causes problems related to the difficulty of applying the “justified fear” criterion in her case. If the minor is accompanied by one (or both) of the parents or another family member in their care who has applied for

refugee status, the child's status will be determined based on the principle of family unity (UNHCR, 1992, No. 213).

The problem of whether an unaccompanied minor can obtain refugee status should be considered primarily in the context of the degree of their mental development and maturity. In the case of children, it is generally necessary to hire a child psychologist. The child and the teenager are not legally independent, so they should, if necessary, have a designated guardian whose task would be to strive to obtain a decision that best protects the child's interests. In the absence of parents and a legally designated guardian, the authorities must ensure that the interests of the minor applying for refugee status are fully protected. (UNHCR, 1992, No. 214).

If the minor is not a child but a juvenile, determining the refugee status is easier – as in the case of an adult – although it still depends on the degree of his maturity. It is assumed that – in the absence of indications that it is otherwise – a person aged 16 or older may be considered mature enough to feel a justified fear of persecution. People under the age of 16 are usually considered to be not fully mature. They may have fears and will of their own, but these factors are not as decisive as in the case of an adult. However, it should be emphasised that these are only general indicators, and the mental maturity of a minor should be determined in the light of their personal, family and cultural experiences (UNHCR, 1992, No. 215).

### **3. NUMBER OF REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE IN POLAND**

According to the Regional Refugee Response Plan (January – December 2023) (RRRP2023), Poland has taken in the largest number of refugees since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In a still unpredictable situation, the transit of refugees through Poland is expected to continue. Most Ukrainians reside in Poland under temporary protection, which is confirmed by receiving a PESEL number under the Act on Assistance to Citizens from Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict in the Territory of that State. As of May 22, 2023, the number of refugees from Ukraine in Poland is estimated at 1 605 738 Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP2023).

**Table 1.** Countries featured in the Refugee Response Plan

<b>Country</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Refugees from Ukraine registered for temporary protection or a similar national protection scheme</b>	<b>Refugees from Ukraine recorded in the country</b>	<b>Border crossings from Ukraine</b>	<b>Border crossing to Ukraine</b>
Bulgaria	2023-05-23	159 225	51 365	Not applicable	Not applicable
Czech Republic	2023-05-14	519 964	520 234	Not applicable	Not applicable
Estonia	2023-05-21	45 690	71 215	Not applicable	Not applicable
Hungary	2023-05-23	36 313	36 313	2 719 596	Not applicable
Latvia	2023-05-19	47 948	31 527	Not applicable	Not applicable
Lithuania	2023-05-19	77 610	77 610	Not applicable	Not applicable
Poland	2023-05-22	1 605 738	1 605 738	11 746 812	9 494 434
Republic of Moldova	2023-05-21	Not applicable	108 889	822 393	468 119
Romania	2023-05-20	132 362	94 179	2 377 264	1 967 334
Slovakia	2023-05-21	116 718	116 718	1 394 047	1 130 152
<b>TOTAL:</b>		<b>2 741 568</b>	<b>2 713 788</b>	<b>19 060 112</b>	<b>13 060 039</b>

Source: Report Ukraine Refugee Situation – Data Explanatory Data UNHCR .org en. Situation Ukraine

Women and children make up about 87% of this group. Children and adolescents account for about 43% of Ukrainian citizens with PESEL numbers. Among adults, women make up 77% of the population. More than 360 Ukrainian citizens have valid temporary residence permits. The vast majority of them are issued in connection with the work undertaken.

The territorial distribution of Ukrainians settling in Poland concentrates in provinces with large urban agglomerations. The most popular regions are: Masovian – 21%, Lower Silesian – 11%, Greater Poland – 11%, and Lesser Poland – 10% (Central Statistical Office, 2023).

In the school year 2021/2022, at least 350 school-age children came to Poland. Almost 40% started education in Polish schools – 139 293. At the end of the last school year, young Ukrainians with refugee experience constituted 4% of all students in Poland. On the other hand, in the 2022/2023 school year, there was a slight decrease in the number of refugee children in Poland to 314 323, but in turn, a larger number took up education in Polish schools 144 228 (CEO, 2023,

- p. 23). Since the war conflict in Ukraine, the following changes in the number of refugee students in the Polish education system can be observed:
- a. Over 60% of Ukrainians aged 7-18 residing in the territory of Poland were outside the Polish education system. These children either benefited from Ukrainian distance education or, in practice, were not covered by any education system. Where does this situation come from? Do mothers take up paid work during this time?
  - b. In 2022–2023, nearly 13,5 refugee students in first grades were taught in secondary, technical, and vocational schools. It is three times more than in 2021–2022 (in 2021–2022, there were only 5 of them).
  - c. Primary school pupils are still the largest number of children with a refugee background. There are over 122 of them in primary and only 22 in secondary schools. It means that 55% of Ukrainian children aged 7-14 years and 24% of young people aged 15-18 years who came to Poland after the outbreak of the war attend Polish schools.
  - d. Differences in the participation of children with a refugee background in the Polish education system can also be seen between individual voivodships. Paradoxically, the percentage of children attending local schools is lower in the provinces closer to the Polish-Ukrainian border (Podkarpackie, Lublin, Mazovia, and Lesser Poland).

#### **4. TRAUMA AND STRESS OF REFUGEE CHILDREN. PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The psychological and social consequences of refugee status for children are manifold. If a minor has not reached an appropriate level of maturity to enable a legitimate concern to be identified like an adult, it may be necessary to pay attention to objective factors. Therefore, if an unaccompanied minor is in a refugee group, this may – depending on the circumstances – indicate that he or she is also a refugee. The situation of the minor’s parents and other family members and the situation in the country of origin should be considered. If there are reasons to suggest that the parents want the child to stay outside the country of origin because of a well-founded fear of being bullied, they can assume that the child feels this fear themselves. The specificity of child refugeeism results from several aspects:

- a. it is a group that perceives death in a completely different way;
- b. it is also the age group that will most often manifest psychosomatic disorders resulting from war experiences;

c. is a group that, as a result of trauma and lack of help, is accused of self-destructive behaviour.

Children are looking for their place and role in the new cultural, social and linguistic environment, which leads to a change in themselves (Williams & Berry, 1991). This situation leads to various dilemmas. How to reconcile integration in the new environment and “disintegration” with what is left in the country of origin (Kohli, 2002). The closest cultural environment is school and school environment.

Cultural mourning (culture bereavement) (Eisenbruch, 1990) affects the physical and mental condition and leads to sadness and grief. Loss of contact with previous life – the feeling of emptiness double loss – no longer belonging to culture, social groups, etc., from the country of origin and no longer belonging to a new place (De Berry & Boyden, 2000).

In turn, acculturation stress is associated with depression, anxiety, a sense of marginalisation, alienation, and loss of identity (Williams and Berry 1991). Research indicates refugee children’s emotional, developmental and behavioural problems (Ajduković & Ajduković, 1998; Burnett & Peel, 2001; Ferenci, 2001; Steel et al., 1999). The psychological consequences for refugee children are primarily:

- sleep disorders, including recurrent nightmares
- impaired concentration
- depression
- withdrawal
- anxiety,
- post-traumatic symptoms
- somatic Symptom Disorder
- deep sadness
- aggression
- Apathy
- excessive agitation
- lowered self-esteem
- deep guilt
- negative outlook on the future
- substance abuse
- suicide attempts and suicides
- psychosis
- adjustment disorders

In a war crisis, uncertainty is permanent and may have greater negative consequences for the child’s mental, emotional, social and educational development.

Leftover households' parents (father, grandparents, older siblings) may contribute to greater emotional difficulties than in the case of another type of refugee, e.g., ecological threat, political persecution, or others. Jensen and Shaw (1993) indicate that the reason for the circumstances of separation from the family may have a greater impact on the child's functioning than the separation itself. As a result of separation, children lose their entire social structure (not only their parents but also their grandparents, neighbours, teachers, colleagues, and members of peer, religious, and cultural groups). The loss of all important adults (in the process of primary socialisation leads to the loss of a sense of security and stability, which is the cause of disturbances in the socio-emotional development of children with a refugee background in the new socialisation environment (school, place of temporary residence) (Bonnerjea, 1994).

One of the main consequences of the war in children with a refugee background is the phenomenon of parentification, i.e., the reversal of roles in the family system when children enter the roles of adult family members. Ukrainian families' structure is undoubtedly changing due to refugees (Aumann & Titzmann, 2019; Kopczak-Wigra & Kasperska-Kurzawa, 2022, p. 124).

In the case of war – fear of threat, sudden escape, and inability to plan deepens children's difficulties in social functioning in the new environment. Research conducted since World War II – separation from parents (separation of families) is the most important risk factor for the psychological functioning of children and adolescents, who are additionally exposed to many cumulative stressors. According to (Ager, 1992; Boothby, 1991), the new school environment (teachers, new colleagues) is a new stressor that impacts the development of psychosocial refugee children. In turn, the presence of loved ones, especially parents, helps to cope with stress and trauma (Hicks et al., 1993). The presence of people supporting special teachers gives a sense of security and psychological anchor and mobilises for everyday life in a completely new geographical and social space.

## **5. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN POLAND IN THE FACE OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

In Poland, children from 7 to 18 years of age are subject to compulsory schooling. If a foreigner applying for refugee status masters the Polish language enough to understand the basic phrases, he/she may study free of charge at a public primary school or secondary school and may enjoy education under the same conditions as Polish citizens of compulsory school age (Article 94a of the Act on the education



system in Poland).

Children with a refugee background aged 3-6 have an equal right to free education and care in public kindergartens. Those who do not know Polish can learn it free of charge at lessons organised by the municipality competent for their place of residence. The child may come to school if he/she has certificates or other documents enabling him/her to be qualified for the appropriate class. If it does not have them, a knowledge test is carried out. The qualification exam is carried out when no documents confirm the child's completion of a specific school or class abroad. It decides which class (at which level of education) the child is to go to, according to his/her skills and the curriculum in force in Poland.

The Act on the education system provides that people (...) who do not know the Polish language or know it at a level insufficient to use education have the right to additional, free Polish language learning. Additional learning of the Polish language for these people is organised by the municipality competent for their place of residence (art. 94a point 4.).

Children also have the right to learn their mother tongue. Lessons may be organised at the school, in consultation with the school director, by cultural and educational associations or diplomatic institutions of the children's country of origin (Education System Act, Article 94a, point 5).

Children in various legal situations can go to school, which is crucial for good cooperation with the child. These situations are:

- a. Possession of refugee status. Granting a foreigner refugee status means granting him all the rights that Polish citizens have, except for political rights. Parents of refugee children have the right to work, medical care, and social support.
- b. Applying for refugee status – in such a situation, some people have not yet been recognised as a refugee by the Polish authorities but have submitted an appropriate application and are waiting for a decision. Children of people applying for refugee status usually live in refugee centres, but they can also live alone. Waiting for a decision on granting refugee status takes about one year – sometimes longer, which means that the child's family lives in high uncertainty and constant waiting for a decision about their fate. This feeling of insecurity and lack of stability affects the child's behaviour and the entire didactic process.
- c. Possession of "humanitarian status" – a person who has not received refugee status in Poland but due to international conventions to which Poland has acceded (e.g., on counteracting torture or respect for human rights) cannot be returned to their country of origin. The situation of such people,

including children, is complicated. Children have the right to stay in Poland but are not entitled to any support from the state. Often, children in this situation are exposed to extreme poverty.

## **6. INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE POLISH MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE**

Admission of refugee children to educational institutions after February 24, 2022 was preventive. Mainly, schools and teachers focused on providing basic care in everyday functioning (providing housing and food and determining educational needs).

Cooperation with families of refugees from Ukraine is crucial in adapting a child to a new environment. Teachers must work in partnership with the child's family and provide them with adequate integration support. Lack of information about the education system: For many refugees from Ukraine, the education system in Poland was and can be new and unknown. Schools and teachers must provide parents and children with information about the education system in Poland and help in adapting to new rules and requirements.

With the start of a new school year in 2022/2023, efforts to educate refugees have shifted mainly towards more medium – and long-term educational activities, such as supporting parents in enrolling their children in the education systems of the host country and transitional measures to limit the time of free learning, such as continuing lessons online to provide various types of non-formal education. The reduction in the number of preparatory departments is the most noticeable change that can be observed based on data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science. In the 2021/2022 school year, 2 414 were functioning throughout the country, and 38 children (27% of all children with a refugee background) were enrolled in schools. In 2022–2023, 956 were created. As a result, only 15 young Ukrainians (10% of all refugee students) are taught in the preparatory wards.

The support that was provided systemically was primarily addressed to two age groups of 7-15 and 16-19 years and mainly concerned:

- School supplies 43% (7-15)
- Additional Polish lessons 44% (16-19)
- Purchase of laptops 48% (16-19)
- Technical facilities 30% (7-15)

**Table 2.** Support needed for education in Polish schools by age group

Age	Overall			
	0-6	7-15	16-19	20-24
<i>Sample size</i>	145	607	79	25
School supplies	28%	43%	23%	0%
Additional Polish language classes	28%	41%	44%	8%
Laptop	11%	31%	48%	12%
Equipment (bags, pencils, uniforms)	21%	30%	10%	0%
Tablet	8%	13%	17%	4%
Internet connection	7%	10%	18%	4%
transportation	4%	6%	14%	0%
Ukrainian textbooks	4%	3%	1%	0%
Assistance for children with disabilities	1%	2%	0%	0%
Space for distance learning classes	1%	1%	0%	0%
Assistance for children of minority groups	0%	0%	0%	0%
No support needed or wanted	32%	21%	22%	24%
Do not know	15%	5%	6%	60%

Source: UNHCR, 2022, p. 18.

Many refugees from Ukraine have gone through the trauma of war and fleeing the country. Schools and teachers must be sensitive to these experiences and provide appropriate emotional support to the child and caregivers (mothers). Each child is different, and the children with a refugee background from Ukraine often have individual needs and problems. Teachers must adopt an individualised approach to teaching and support the child in acquiring skills to help him find himself in a new environment.

In conclusion, the challenges of schools and teachers in teaching refugee children from Ukraine are complex and require an individualised approach. Co-operating with families, providing appropriate emotional support, and learning Polish are crucial in the child's adaptation to a new environment. The systemic support that schools offer is primarily:

- a. Information support
- b. Technical support
- c. Language assistance

From the analysis of studies and reports, it can be concluded that the school should introduce:

- a. Educational diagnosis. Due to the different education systems and age groups
- b. Psychological support and providing the system with care in a situation of increased anxiety or crisis. Permanent psychological care (Szaban, 2022).

## **7. SELECTED PROBLEMS IN THE EDUCATION OF REFUGEE CHILDREN. TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE**

According to Polish teachers, the process hindering integration with Polish teachers is the tendency to create relatively closed Ukrainian groups if there is a larger group of refugee students in a given class. In this sense, assigning a large group of Ukrainians to one class (e.g., a teacher who knows the language or has experience working with a foreign student) is not beneficial (CEO, 2022). Even in schools that tried to support teachers by searching for and duplicating materials, preparing scenarios of educational lessons, in-school improvement, and self-help activities, a serious problem was access to textbooks, sets of exercises, worksheets for some subjects, especially exact ones, materials for learning Polish as a foreign language. Most of the materials used required much work and time from teachers.

Children with a refugee background are often completely dependent on the institutions of the host country. According to Polish teachers, the educational process is hindered by:

- a. Lack of verified, adequate and easily accessible sources with teaching materials for working with foreign students in preparatory wards and mixed classes.
- b. No diagnosis of students. Teachers usually do not have access to the history of a student from a Ukrainian school. There is a lack of knowledge about the subjects taught, grades obtained, and educational needs.
- c. The lack of psychological and pedagogical support for Ukrainian students is one of the most serious problems that Polish teachers pay attention to. The issue of trauma, potentially experienced by refugees, is made aware by the school staff, who, however, know that they do not have the tools for diagnosis and therapy. The most commonly accepted solution is an attempt to build “normality”. Teachers report the need to develop their skills in diagnosing and responding to difficult emotions, as well as iden-

tifying situations that threaten the emotional safety of students or require specialised intervention.

The solution that helps overcome the challenges of providing emotional security (to students and teachers), working through cultural differences, supporting educational processes, and unblocking contact between the school and the parent is the institution of an intercultural assistant/foreign child. The belief in the similarity of Polish and Ukrainian cultures prevails, which is conducive to overlooking significant cultural differences. Meanwhile, Ukrainian students emphasise numerous differences at the level of school culture, and attempts to undertake intercultural education are sporadic.

However, the problem is the lack of systemic solutions – in the surveyed schools, assistants were employed thanks to non-governmental organisations, long-term planning and contracting of assistants' work and their extremely low salaries.

Children with refugee backgrounds were included in the education process in Poland in a situation of profound political and economic changes on both sides of the border, both in Poland and Ukraine. Such sudden changes have had an impact not only on the health and mental well-being of adults but also on children, whose ties with their previous family and educational environment were abruptly severed. The process of education in a new space and secondary socialisation was transferred to an entirely new area of geographical, social, and cultural space.

Based on the reflection on available reports, the main conclusion can be drawn that thanks to the integration of teachers and efficient communication in response to critical problems and new challenges, they stood up to actively integrate refugee children into the education system in Poland. However, there are still many issues and problems that have only been signalled, such as permanent psychological care for refugee children, comprehensive language assistance for both students and teachers, long-term guidelines for the content and methods of teaching in classes with students with refugee backgrounds and war trauma.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the difficulties faced by teachers in the didactic process of children with a refugee background may allow them to create, above all, a methodological basis for the development of specific guidelines and a kind of recommendation and show new forms of support (textbooks, educational materials) that will allow to better respond to the challenges in the face of the migration and war crisis. The

knowledge base can inspire government commissions to implement and propose solutions adequate to the situation and place of needs and not at the level of “ideas” difficult to implement in the practical sphere of work in the school and educational environment.

Bottom-up activities – bottom-up tips from teachers (practitioners) are more effective and bring specific forms of response to everyday problems in intercultural schools. Support for inclusive education should concern the largest possible group of students. The support is not only aimed at intervention activities but should seek a comprehensive diagnosis and continue activities aimed at including children with a refugee background in the host country’s education system.

Strategies related to the admission of students to schools and classes varied – from systematic diagnosis and support for maintaining constant proportions between Polish and foreign students in class branches to automatic assignment of students to the fewest classes. The students themselves talk about the feeling of alienation, stress and language barrier when entering a new environment. Their Polish peers, in turn, experienced difficult emotions related to the outbreak of war and sudden changes in their school.

In the common opinion of teachers, the influx of refugees to their classes did not translate negatively into the quality of education. However, there are numerous concerns about the future, especially in the last classes, among parents of children with judgments and where large groups of Ukrainian students were assigned to the wards. Teachers themselves are looking for a way to fill competence gaps in language or psychology, but they report the urgent need for systemic regulations in this area. Is the implementation of laundry procedures alone sufficient? Therefore, school heads and teaching staff are waiting for specific forms of material and financial support to ensure the educational process and psychological support at the highest level. The experience of the last two years has shown that the personal approach of teachers and their attitude and competencies allowed for the efficient implementation and continuation of education of children from Ukraine in the situation of war conflict in Polish schools, but the following years require coordination of systemic activities on the part of: the Polish government, the Polish Ministry of Education and Science, school principals, teachers, and guardians of children with a refugee background.

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