

## Implementing Inclusive Education in the Experience of Teachers Working with Children from Ukraine

### Urzeczywistnianie edukacji włączającej w doświadczeniu nauczycieli pracujących z dziećmi z Ukrainy

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**Abstract:** The war in Ukraine contributed to a huge wave of refugees arriving at the territory of the EU member states, Moldova and Georgia. Most mothers with school-age children came to Poland. In this situation, mobilization took place, and a number of actions were taken on many different levels to ensure, among others: access to the labour market, social assistance, medical care and education. Teachers in schools accepting children from Ukraine had to develop adequate educational strategies. Schools began to implement inclusive education understood as an approach providing all students, as full participants in the teaching-learning process, with appropriate conditions for developing their personal potential and acquiring competences needed to function well in society regardless of their special needs, health condition, origin, culture. The article presents the results of research aimed at finding an answer to the question: How do teachers working with students from Ukraine in Polish schools implement inclusive education? The survey covered 258 teachers from all over Poland working with children from Ukraine at the first stage of education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, teacher, students from Ukraine in Poland, educational practice

**Abstrakt:** Wojna w Ukrainie przyczyniła się do olbrzymiej fali uchodźców przybywających na terytorium państw członkowskich UE, Mołdawii i Gruzji. Najwięcej matek z dziećmi w wieku szkolnym przyjechało do Polski. W tej sytuacji nastąpiła mobilizacja i podjęto szereg działań na wielu różnych płaszczyznach, aby zapewnić m.in. dostęp do rynku pracy, pomocy społecznej, opieki medycznej i edukacji. Nauczyciele w szkołach przyjmujących dzieci z Ukrainy musieli opracować adekwatne strategie edukacyjne. Zaczęto urzeczywistniać edukację włączającą rozumianą jako takie podejście, które każdemu uczniowi, jako pełnoprawnemu uczestnikowi procesu nauczania-uczenia się (bez względu na potrzeby specjalne, stan zdrowia, pochodzenie, kulturę), zapewnia odpowiednie warunki do rozwoju osobistego potencjału i zdobycie kompetencji potrzebnych do dobrego funkcjonowania w społeczeństwie. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań, których celem, była próba odnalezienia odpowiedzi na pytanie: Jak nauczyciele pracujący z uczniami z Ukrainy w polskiej szkole urzeczywistniają edukację włączającą? W badaniu ankietowym wzięło udział 258 nauczycieli z całej Polski pracujących z dziećmi z Ukrainy na pierwszym etapie edukacyjnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja włączająca, nauczyciel, uczniowie z Ukrainy w Polsce, praktyka edukacyjna



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## INTRODUCTION

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Poland, as a neighbouring country, found itself in a specific situation that called for mobilization and deliberate action in many different areas, including education. The latest data from the report on the Refugee students from Ukraine in the Polish education from January 2024 show that the number of children in Polish schools reached approximately 185,000 (Chrostowska 2024). The arrival of such a large number of refugee children posed numerous challenges to educational institutions, in terms of both admission of students and organization of the teaching process.

The report *Razem w klasie. Dzieci z Ukrainy w polskich szkołach* [Together in the Classroom: Children from Ukraine in Polish Schools] (Pyżalski et al. 2022) emphasized that there were several reasons why organizing education for Ukrainian students posed many challenges. First, a large number of children were admitted to schools over a short period of time, which required ad hoc organizational changes. Second, the arrival of children and their families was not the outcome of a decision made under normal circumstances. The refugees were forced to do so by a crisis situation. The resulting poor emotional and mental state of the immigrants caused an additional challenge to cultural and communication differences faced the refugees. Teachers were therefore faced with a new dilemma: how to support students who require special care while also organizing education in an appropriate manner. Establishing inclusive schools that support refugee children in adjusting to school life was imperative.

Until recently, the question of teaching and supporting foreign students seems to have been disregarded. However, the ongoing influx of immigrants and refugees into numerous countries resulted in rising numbers of analyses and studies on refugee education in the literature of the 21st century, most of which referred to the situation in Canada, Australia and the USA (Block et al. 2014; Taylor & Sidhu 2012). Similar studies have recently been conducted also in Europe, including Poland (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska & Szostak-Król 2016; Januszewska 2017). However, among these, there are still only a few publications relating to Ukrainian children, who, due to the ongoing war, constitute the largest group of foreign students in Polish schools (Pyżalski et al. 2022; Zbróg 2022, Popławska & Bocharova 2023; Lintner et al. 2023, Toros et al. 2024). Currently, there are no publications presenting the results of

empirical research on issues related to organizing the teaching and educational process in schools including teachers' experiences.

In view of the above, the present article focuses on the analysis of the course and factors determining the teaching and educational work with children from Ukraine.

#### 1. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: BASIC PRINCIPLES

Most European countries perceive inclusive education as a way to ensure equal educational rights for all. However, there are significant differences in definitions and practices of inclusive education. According to a narrow definition of inclusion, it applies only to students with special educational needs, while a broad definition embraces all students and marginalized groups, not just those with disabilities. The latter is in line with the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, which concerns all groups of students at risk of experiencing problems at school due to diversity (UNESCO 1994). The declaration covers all students at risk of segregation and their right to participate in common educational activities within the regular school system, regardless of special needs, gender, origin, culture, etc. Following this idea, education develops the potential of each student (Haug 2017).

Inclusion of Ukrainian students in the education process was a way to ensure that children under temporary protection could effectively participate in the social, cultural and economic life of the host country. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees used the term "inclusion" to refer to the process of bringing together refugees and the host country citizens through national education systems (UNHCR 2012). Inclusive education means that all students become part of the school community and that they have a sense of belonging to it, regardless of their differences. It is a manifestation of each individual's inalienable right to education (Taylor & Sidhu 2012). The goal of inclusive education is to provide all students with the right environment allowing them to reach their full potential. This goal can be accomplished by putting inclusive education in practice so that all students can develop, regardless of their unique needs, abilities and qualities (Podgórska-Jachnik 2020).

In practice, inclusive education is implemented in two dimensions. The first one is structural integration which consists in providing students with access to national public schools, institutions and

services, while the second is relational integration, which means ensuring the socio-cultural inclusion of refugees and striving for their integrity with the host country community (Dryden-Peterson 2020).

According to Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow (2011), inclusion of students in the education system should be characterized by: 1) valuing and supporting all students' diversity; 2) increasing participation of all students in the educational process; 3) reducing barriers in the learning process and eliminating marginalization in education; 4) reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students, including those with disabilities or special educational needs; 5) perceiving differences among students as a learning challenge, rather than a problem that has to be overcome; 6) increasing the role of schools in building the educational environment and its values; 7) cultivating mutually supportive relationships between schools and communities; 8) recognizing that integration in education is an aspect reflecting social integration.

Strategies to strengthen inclusive processes cover a number of issues that can be grouped into the following ten areas.

1. Pedagogical issues concerning difficulties in accepting the assumptions of the new education system, adapting to new educational activities and mastering educational materials (Ainscow & Sandill 2010).
2. Psychological aspect related to difficulties with concentration, socialization, anxiety and sensitivity (de Boer & Kuijper 2020).
3. Social aspect concerning inappropriate behaviour towards peers and teachers, difficulties in establishing contacts and relationships with other families and problems with adapting to society and accepting its rules and norms.
4. Cultural aspect related to the potential lack of knowledge about the culture, values, social norms of the host country, the ensuing cultural differences, as well as the fear of losing one's own cultural identity (Ernst-Slavit & Wenger 2006).
5. Linguistic aspect related to inability to communicate and speak the language of the host country.

6. Curriculum issues including differences in the learning content of school programs (Koehler & Schneider 2019).
7. Family involvement related to cooperation between parents and schools (Serna & Martínez 2019).
8. The aspect of teacher competencies, i.e. the extent of teachers' readiness to work in multicultural settings and the methodology employed in organizing courses in a way enabling teachers to create a proper learning environment for all children (Glazzard 2011).
9. The aspect of school preparation that encompasses resource accessibility and institutional assistance for all students (Wodcock & Woolfson 2019).
10. Intercultural aspect of the environment concerning the receptiveness or resistance of the local environment to multiculturalism (Nikitorowicz 2018).

Inclusive education for refugee children focuses not only on their special educational needs or the barriers that students encounter, but primarily on improving educational practices. In order to create a friendly school/classroom environment where all students can reach their potential, and where cultural diversity is valued as a resource and used to boost the efficacy of the educational process, it is crucial to choose an appropriate curriculum and adequate methods of its implementation.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus of the research was primarily on issues related to the organization of teaching and educational work in a culturally diverse classroom. Key issues here included the use teaching methods, didactic resources, forms of work, and ways of communication to allow Ukrainian students to fully participate in the teaching and learning process. The aim was to define the sources of difficulties faced by children from Ukraine and to identify extracurricular activities targeted at student inclusion and building positive relationships with parents.

The research was of a quantitative character, and it was conducted using the diagnostic survey method based on an individual anonymous online questionnaire. This allowed to gather information about the studied social phenomenon, as well as the views, opinions, attitudes and behaviours of a large

number of survey respondents (Babbie 2009, 132). A custom created questionnaire with both closed- and open-ended questions was used to gather data.

The research was conducted in 2023, and it covered 258 teachers. All respondents declared having prior experience working with Ukrainian children. Women made up the majority of respondents (98.8%), with 1.3% being men. Most respondents (80.6%) held master's degrees; 55% of the respondents had been in their line of work for more than 20 years; 12.8% had worked for 5 to 9 years and for 15 to 20 years. The proportion of employees with 10-14 years of experience was 13.6%, which was marginally higher; 5.8% of the respondents had been working for less than five years.

The research sample was selected using random purposive sampling. Purposeful selection embraced teachers working with children from Ukraine, while all respondents were randomly selected from all regions of Poland (55% in big cities, 31% in small towns, 14% in rural areas).

### 3. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED RESEARCH RESULTS

At the beginning, the study focused on determining teachers' perception of students from Ukraine. According to the majority of respondents (68.6%), children from Ukraine have equal access to education, just like Polish children. The vast majority of children benefit from an integrated education model, which involves Ukrainian children learning according to the core curriculum together with Polish children. The teaching program is tailored to the developmental and educational needs as well as psychophysical capabilities of children. In addition, students have the opportunity to take additional Polish language classes.

Two-thirds of respondents declared that they approached Ukrainian children as students with special educational needs or learning difficulties. This conclusion was drawn by the respondents based on the diagnosis of children's needs, which they carried out using methods such as conversation, observation, interview with the child and parents, analysis of children's work, and verification/diagnostic tests.

In their teaching work, teachers use diverse teaching methods facilitating fuller participation of Ukrainian children in the teaching-learning process. These include:

- introducing auxiliary and guiding questions (*often* – 87.2%, *sometimes* – 10.5%)

- experiments (*often* – 34.5%, *sometimes* – 51.2%)
- valorisation methods (*often* – 25.2%, *sometimes* – 53.1%)
- practical methods (*often* – 77.5%, *sometimes* – 20.5%)
- methods of text preparation (*often* – 30.6%, *sometimes* – 37.9%)
- language portfolio (*often* – 20.5%, *sometimes* – 31.4%)
- intercultural portfolio (*often* – 10.1%, *sometimes* – 34.1%)
- simplifying exercises (*often* – 58.9%, *sometimes* – 32.2%)
- listening to fairy tales (*often* – 36.1%, *sometimes* – 47.3%)
- educational games and activities (*often* – 74.8%, *sometimes* – 21.7%)
- art works (*often* – 85.3%, *sometimes* – 13.2%)
- project method (*often* – 34.5%, *sometimes* – 42.6%).

The respondents use forms of work adapted to children's abilities, i.e. individual work – different tasks (*often* – 78.3%, *sometimes* – 18.2%), as well as work in groups (*often* – 58.1%, *sometimes* – 39, 2%) favouring integration – cooperation of students during lessons, not only exchange of knowledge and skills, but also overcoming of communication and social barriers.

Teachers used a variety of teaching methods, including personalized worksheets (77.9%), visual aids (87.2%), referencing important life events (70.2%), and electronic media (78.3%), to meet the needs of Ukrainian children and ensure that they fully participated in lessons. Additionally, one third of the surveyed teachers set distinct requirements for Polish and Ukrainian students, and the majority of them used different grading rules for Ukrainian students (*often* 45.3%, *sometimes* – 34.9%).

Teachers help Ukrainian students' learning by assigning personalized assignments, creating specialized teaching materials, and using visual aids They try to use practical, valorising and activating methods when working with children, and motivate them to engage in extracurricular activities. Based on the answers provided by the respondents, assistance is provided by Ukrainian teachers, cultural assistants, psychologists, and school counsellors in some institutions. Teachers reported using tablets with specific apps and translators to interact with students.

Another issue teachers were asked about were the ways they communicate with children. 81.4% reported difficulties communicating in Polish. According to the respondents, children also had difficulties understanding the teaching content (72.9%) and adjusting to the new environment (26.4%). About a quarter of the surveyed teachers pointed to students' difficulties in relationships with their colleagues (25.2%) and in understanding Polish culture and customs (24%). Additionally, respondents mentioned difficulties in meeting school demands by students (14%), as well as problems in relationships with teachers (10.5%) or in using the school's technological environment (3.9%).

The teachers taking part in the research pointed to a number of diverse biopsychological (internal) and didactic factors as well as, to a lesser degree, environmental factors as the reasons behind the challenges faced by children from Ukraine.

The first category of factors pertaining to children included: lack of knowledge of the Polish language (88.4% of responses), varying levels of knowledge in specific subjects (79.1% of responses), longing for home/loved ones (77.5% of responses), lack of a sense of stability in life as a result of war trauma and escape from the homeland (69.4% of responses), inability to control negative emotions such as sadness, anger, fear (38.4% of responses), lack of motivation to learn (39.9 % of responses), apathy, lack of interest or active participation in the lesson (37.2% of responses), cultural and religious differences (31.8% of responses).

The second category of factors related to teaching included: lack of assisting teachers (57.4%), lack of linguistic preparation of teachers (53.5%), low proficiency of teachers in working with foreign children (45.3%), lack of appropriate textbooks, teaching aids (42.2%), lack of appropriate diagnosis of children's needs (19.8%).

The surveyed teachers were also questioned about extracurricular activities undertaken to promote student inclusion. Integration events organized in schools included: organizing *trips* – 97.3%; running *green schools* – 21.7%; organizing *school discos* – 32.6%, and in a small percentage: festivals, various entertainments, integration events, trips to the cinema.

The presence of Ukrainian children in the class induced the necessity to build good relationships with their parents/family. The great majority of respondents (98.1%) indicated that parents were provided



with information about their children and the school: 82.2% of teachers discussed with parents how the school operates; 81.8%, discussed with parents the responsibilities of students and parents. The majority (80.2%) of respondents indicated that they were the ones who initiated contact with parents and encouraged them to actively participate in class life. Three-quarters (75.2%) of respondents indicated that, first of all, they tried to inform parents about the school's obligations towards their children, and 65.9% – about the school's expectations towards the children. An interesting issue seems to be how parents communicated with teachers: over half (54.3%) of parents were willing to contact teachers face to face; one third – through electronic media; few (4.7%) – adopted a demanding attitude and 3.5% of parents completely avoided contact with schools.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The presented research allowed to understand how inclusive education is implemented in the case of Ukrainian children studying in Polish schools. In the final section of the article, it is important to highlight the contribution of the research to educational practice. Based on the analysis of the research results, the article presented the teaching and educational process, the factors that influenced its implementation, and the difficulties faced by the surveyed teachers when they strived to implement inclusive education. Teachers participating in the research were given the chance to share their personal accounts of dealing with Ukrainian children. To ensure that all students have the best possible conditions allowing them to develop and shape their competences, most teachers appropriately enhanced and changed the curriculum's content as well as adapted the methods, means and forms of instruction to meet the specific needs of children they worked with. According to meta-research, such adaptation of general teaching strategies produces the best results for most students (Florian 2014; Mitchell & Sutherland 2014). The respondents' statements, on the one hand, showed the difficulties faced by the teachers themselves in the classrooms, and on the other, highlighted the difficulties encountered by Ukrainian children. The majority of Ukrainian students did not speak Polish, which made it difficult for them to communicate with one another in class, comprehend the material being taught, and express their emotions (Cavicchiolo et al. 2023). As a result, students may become isolated since such a situation keeps them from taking part in group activities and impedes their ability to learn. Therefore, teaching students

the language of the host nation would be one of the first things to take into account in order to enable inclusion. About 90% of Ukrainian students were placed in regular classes with Polish students, the rest (approx. 10%) attended preparatory classes (Pacek 2022). Ukrainian students who did not speak Polish, could participate in 6 hours of additional Polish language lessons.

The respondents' answers indicate that in order to include students in the educational process, it was also necessary to address their diverse needs (psychological, social, and educational). The majority of surveyed teachers (66%) declared that they approached Ukrainian students as children with special educational needs or learning difficulties. Teachers helped children handle difficult circumstances and increased their stress tolerance. Schools are thought to be an important environment contributing to the development of the mental health of children who have experienced trauma related to armed conflict (Persson & Rousseau 2008). They can provide a space allowing children to socialize and express themselves creatively and symbolically, which is a determining factor of their well-being (Rousseau et al. 2007). Providing refugee children with education is a fundamental question. However, in addition to meeting the children's educational needs, it is also important to address their needs for socialization and social inclusion. Therefore, schools should create an environment promoting cross-cultural communication while increasing students' sensitivity to and awareness of other cultures (Taylor & Sidhu 2012). According to the teachers' opinions, students' needs can be satisfied outside of the classroom as well through extracurricular activities which support students' socialization and sense of belonging to a given community, such as: field trips and extracurricular clubs, festivals, different forms of entertainment, team-building events, and trips to the cinema.

School is a microcosm of society in which refugee students may gain the skills necessary for successful functioning, both in the school environment and in society, by receiving a friendly welcome, acceptance, understanding, respect, appropriate support and, to the extent possible, stabilization.

It is difficult to provide an effective implementation strategy for inclusive education in educational practice because so much depends on the attitudes and skills of teachers. We hope that this article's empirical insights into the difficulties faced by teachers and the ways they can overcome them will encourage further research and thought.

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