

# Attitudes of Primary School Teachers Towards Multicultural Education: Between Acceptance and Challenges

## Postawy nauczycieli szkół podstawowych wobec edukacji wielokulturowej: między akceptacją a wyzwaniami

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine the attitudes of primary school teachers towards multicultural education, focusing on the contrast between acceptance and challenges. The study presents results of a qualitative research project, which is part of a broader mixed-methods study on teachers' approaches to multiculturalism. As part of a diagnostic survey conducted among primary school teachers, 15 individuals agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The findings reveal divergent attitudes among teachers towards students from different cultural backgrounds. Based on their perspectives and experiences, the participants were classified into two groups. The first group expressed a positive attitude towards multicultural education, perceiving cultural diversity as an enriching and integral part of their teaching practice. In contrast, the second group viewed multicultural education as problematic, arguing that excessive focus on culturally diverse students might come at the expense of Polish students. The study highlights the need for teacher support and professional development to address the challenges of multicultural education effectively. Strengthening teachers' intercultural competencies is essential for the successful implementation of inclusive education principles in culturally diverse classrooms.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, teachers' attitudes, cultural diversity, primary education, inclusive teaching.

**Abstrakt:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza postaw nauczycieli szkół podstawowych wobec edukacji wielokulturowej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem kontrastu między akceptacją a wyzwaniami. Badanie przedstawia wyniki jakościowego projektu badawczego, będącego częścią szerszego badania mieszanego dotyczącego podejść nauczycieli do wielokulturowości. W ramach sondażu diagnostycznego przeprowadzonego wśród nauczycieli szkół podstawowych 15 osób wyraziło zgodę na udział w pogłębionych wywiadach. Wyniki badań ujawniają zróżnicowane postawy nauczycieli wobec uczniów pochodzących z różnych kręgów kulturowych. Na podstawie ich opinii i doświadczeń uczestnicy zostali podzieleni na dwie grupy. Pierwsza grupa wykazywała pozytywne nastawienie wobec edukacji wielokulturowej, postrzegając różnorodność kulturową jako wzbogacający i integralny element swojej pracy. Druga grupa natomiast traktowała edukację wielokulturową jako wyzwanie, argumentując, że nadmierne skupienie na uczniach z odmiennych środowisk kulturowych może odbywać się kosztem polskich uczniów. Badanie podkreśla potrzebę wsparcia nauczycieli oraz rozwijania ich kompetencji zawodowych, aby mogli skutecznie radzić sobie z wyzwaniami edukacji wielokulturowej. Wzmacnianie kompetencji interkulturowych nauczycieli jest kluczowe dla efektywnej realizacji zasad edukacji włączającej w klasach o zróżnicowanej kulturowości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja wielokulturowa, postawy nauczycieli, różnorodność kulturowa, szkoła podstawowa.



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## INTRODUCTION

,With the implementation of the idea of open borders, almost all European countries became open and, therefore, multicultural. Jerzy Nikitorowicz (2017, 13) claims that ‘multiculturalism is a natural state of diversity (...) the multiplicity and natural diversity of cultures on the globe will “meet” sooner or later because of themselves or Others’. Cultural diversity is a debatable term that usually refers to the co-existence of diverse knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, religions, languages, skills, as well as disabilities, genders, ethnic groups, races, nationalities and sexual orientations of people. It may also refer to how people respond to this reality and choose to live in it (Lin 2020).

The basis of a democratic state is multicultural education, which provides equal opportunities to all students and gives every pupil the possibility of learning (Banks et al. 2001). James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (2010) describe multicultural education as a concept and movement of educational reforms in which all students have equal learning opportunities irrespective of sex, social class, as well as ethnic, racial and cultural characteristics. It is a comprehensive educational reform that opposes all forms of discrimination and promotes democratic principles of social justice (Nieto & Bode 2013). Geneva Gay (1994) indicates that the goals of multicultural education in school include:

1. Development of ethnic and cultural skills: students learn their own language and those of other nations, become familiar with famous figures, historical events and ethnic minorities, which helps them develop ethnic and cultural skills, respect the needs of other people and shape their own identity.
2. Personal development: students learn more about themselves, build their self-esteem and sense of identity, and are motivated and encouraged to strive for learning achievements.
3. Development of attitudes and values: students are encouraged to accept ethnic pluralism and various cultural environments and to respect attitudes and values of other people.
4. Shaping of multicultural social competences: students are stimulated to develop their interpersonal communication skills.

Independent studies conducted so far (Bocharova & Melnik 2023; Popławska & Bocharova 2023) and reports by other researchers of this subject area (Marzec 2024; Stankiewicz & Żurek 2022; Tędziągolska et al. 2023; Głowacka et al. 2022; Parmigiani et al. 2023; Ciupińska 2022; Bocharova & Popławska 2024) indicate that the main problems faced by students and teachers were organisational, psychological, communication, educational and multicultural issues.

Many teachers are aware of the importance of multicultural education and actively support its implementation, seeing it as a way of preparing students for life in a global society. However, some teachers may feel inadequately prepared or supported with regard to the implementation of multicultural education due to the lack of appropriate materials, training or administrative support. They may also

encounter resistance from parents, students, and even other teachers who do not understand or appreciate the importance of multicultural education.

The aim of this paper is to learn about the opinions of primary school teachers on multicultural education and their approach to working in culturally diverse classes.

## 1. METHODOLOGY OF OWN RESEARCH

The paper presents the results of a qualitative study being a part of a mixed study aimed at developing the author's scale of teachers' attitudes towards multiculturalism. Combining quantitative and qualitative data in the context of understanding teachers' attitudes towards multiculturalism and their approach to working in a multicultural class is crucial for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. According to John Creswell (2013), this type of data integration makes it possible to identify broad numerical trends and detailed qualitative information, which together leads to a more complete understanding of teachers' attitudes and opinions. Quantitative data allow for an overview of the situation and the identification of trends on an aggregate level. Qualitative data, such as the results of interviews with teachers, provide a deeper understanding of teachers' individual experience, beliefs and approaches to working with students from different cultures. An analysis of the content of the interviews made it possible to identify teachers' motivations to work with multicultural students, their challenges, experiences of successes and failures, and adaptation strategies. Combining these two types of data allows the researcher to adopt a holistic approach to examining the problem, taking both general trends and individual contexts into account.

As part of the diagnostic survey conducted among primary school teachers who work with students from different cultures, 15 people agreed to participate in in-depth interviews regarding their perception of multicultural education and work in multicultural classes. The study was based on the interpretative paradigm, which assumes that it is possible to understand the studied phenomena thanks to participants' interpretations (Verschuren 2003). The context of the study was consistent with the constructivist worldview. According to constructivism, individuals try to understand the world by giving subjective meanings connected with specific objects and phenomena to their experiences (Creswell 2013). Constructivism assumes that participants not only discover knowledge but also create and find it in order to understand various experiences they encounter (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The study not only took account of teachers' subjective experiences and interpretations but also emphasised their active role in the construction of knowledge and meanings in the context of multiculturalism.

The research sample consisted of 15 teachers (3 men and 12 women) working in primary schools in various regions of Poland. The sample was selected using the criteria selection method, which is one of the methods of intentional selection of participants. In this method, the studied situation must meet specific requirements (Patton 2014). The criteria of selection included teachers' work in primary

schools and the presence of students from various cultures in their classes. The demographic data of participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research sample (personal data)

| Sex | Age | Length of service | Province                  |
|-----|-----|-------------------|---------------------------|
| M1  | 55  | 27                | Masovia, small city       |
| M2  | 43  | 15                | Lower Silesia, small city |
| M3  | 65  | 38                | Silesia, big city         |
| K1  | 28  | 4                 | Wielkopolska, big city    |
| K2  | 57  | 32                | Małopolska, small city    |
| K3  | 54  | 27                | Małopolska, village       |
| K4  | 49  | 24                | Subcarpathia, small city  |
| K5  | 48  | 23                | Lower Silesia, small city |
| K6  | 40  | 15                | Masovia, big city         |
| K7  | 56  | 30                | Łódź, big city            |
| K8  | 44  | 17                | Świętokrzyskie, village   |
| K9  | 56  | 28                | Lubuskie, big city        |
| K10 | 49  | 20                | Pomerania, small city     |
| K11 | 37  | 12                | Subcarpathia, small city  |
| K12 | 32  | 7                 | Małopolska, big city      |

Source: Own work.

The research tool selected for the collection of data was the interview, which allows the researcher to capture the feelings, ideas, experiences and views of participants. From among structured, partly structured and non-structured interviews, the partly structured interview was selected as the most favourable one for the study. It takes new questions into account and enables spontaneous interaction, which motivates respondents to express their own ideas. The participants of the study had freedom and flexibility both with regard to the order of questions and the time of their answers. Interviews with twelve respondents were conducted using the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology on Skype and Zoom, with enabled voice communication and multimedia sessions (Lo Iacono et al. 2016). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with three teachers from the Małopolska region. The use of the VoIP technology made it possible to contact participants from various regions of Poland with the efficiency of time and costs and increased the diversity of the research sample.

The interview form consisted of two parts: the first part contained such personal data as sex, age, length of service and place of residence. The second part contained five main questions regarding multicultural education and the teacher's work in a multicultural class:

1. How do you perceive multiculturalism in school? Could you share your views on that subject?
2. Polish schools become less and less homogeneous because of the emergence of refugee children. Are teachers prepared for these inevitable changes?

3. What is your opinion about working in a multicultural class: is it an opportunity or a challenge?
4. What difficulties are encountered by teachers in a multicultural class?
5. Do children from other cultures find it difficult to acclimatise in Polish school?

During interviews, other questions were also asked depending on the progress of the interview, e.g. about favouring Ukrainian students and students' behaviours in school and during lessons. Some interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and others were conducted along with taking detailed notes. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then coded.

The research process, which included 1/ data coding (assignment of categories (codes) to text fragments (subcategories) collected as a result of interviews); 2/ identification of topics (grouping related subcategories into bigger, more general thematic categories that best reflect the essence of collected data); 3/ information ordering (ordering and grouping of collected information during the study in accordance with assigned thematic categories) and 4/ interpretation of results (analysing collected data in the theoretical and interpretative context), plays a crucial role in the analysis of qualitative data, particularly in the context of interpretative research (Gormez 2021, 3-4). In order to retain the anonymity of the participants and to protect their identity and personal data, relevant identification codes were used. Codes M1–M3 for male teachers and codes K1–K12 for female teachers were used.

The data from the study were analysed using the content analysis method. It is an interpretative approach, which allows the researcher to delve into meanings and patterns in quantitative data. In the context of research on multiculturalism, this method enables the identification of key topics and the representation of cultural diversity issues in schools.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

### A. Perception of Multiculturalism in Schools

The study identified three types of attitudes towards multiculturalism: negative, ambivalent, and positive. These attitudes vary and stem from both teachers' personal experiences and specific local school contexts in which they work.

Negative perceptions (M1, K1, K12, K4) are characterized by viewing multiculturalism mainly as a source of difficulties—both disciplinary and organizational. For some teachers, culturally diverse students create tension and disrupt established school routines. These statements may be interpreted as indicators of fear of change and a lack of tools to effectively manage diversity. They also reveal a lack of reflection on the potential benefits of intercultural contact, suggesting limited intercultural awareness.

As one respondent stated: "Multiculturalism in school is only a source of problems" (M1).

Another added: “The presence of many cultures in school can lead only to problems” (K1).

Ambivalent attitudes (M2) reflect respondents’ internal conflict—on the one hand, they acknowledge the value of intercultural cooperation, yet on the other, they express criticism toward specific national groups. Such statements illustrate the mechanism of projection and cultural prejudice, which may be unconscious and result from tensions in everyday professional practice.

One teacher remarked: “Multiculturalism is valuable when everyone respects and co-operates. But with Ukrainians, it’s more difficult—they often act selfishly and don’t want to help Poles” (M2).

Positive attitudes (M3, K5, K8) are marked by openness and a constructive approach to multiculturalism as a natural phenomenon in a globalized world. These teachers recognize the educational value of diversity and point to the development of their own and their students’ competencies as an outcome of intercultural contact. Their views align with inclusive education and the idea of schools as spaces for cultural exchange (Banks, McGee Banks 2010; Gay 1994).

As noted by one respondent: “Multiculturalism brings advantages to both sides—we can inspire each other and learn new things” (K5).

Another emphasized: “Introducing multiculturalism into the classroom is inevitable. From my experience, I see more benefits than problems” (K8).

### B. Teachers’ Readiness for Change

The study revealed significant variation in teachers’ attitudes toward the need to change their pedagogical and educational practices in response to multiculturalism. Some teachers’ resistance to adaptation (K2, K6, K3) stems from the belief that the responsibility for integration lies solely with foreign students. These attitudes can be analysed in the context of dominant cultural norms and a fear of losing national identity. Referring to Nathan Glazer’s (1997) concept, the lack of openness to intercultural dialogue results in perceiving diversity as a threat. For example, one teacher stated: “Why should we adapt to them? It’s them who should follow our rules. We are in Poland” (K6).

Open and reflective attitudes (K8, K11, K7) suggest a greater awareness of the challenges and a willingness to adapt teaching strategies to the changing school reality. These teachers recognize the school not only as an institution that reproduces majority cultural norms, but as a space for building community and inclusion. As one noted: “Working in a multicultural class is a challenge, but also a chance to teach children respect and tolerance” (K11).

Experience as an asset (M3) illustrates that long-term professional practice can facilitate the integration of intercultural approaches into everyday teaching. Such teachers view students from different cultures not as a problem, but as an educational challenge and opportunity – consistent with the notion of transformative education (Nieto & Bode, 2013).

As M3 commented: “Thanks to working with children from Ukraine, Georgia and Russia, I’ve had a chance to grow professionally – it’s a valuable experience”.

### C. Difficulties in Working with Multicultural Classes

The third thematic area refers to the real difficulties that teachers encounter in their everyday work. Low student motivation and behavioral difficulties (K6, K12, M1) were among the most frequently reported issues. Teachers expressed frustration caused by the lack of engagement of students with a migration background. It is important to recognize, however, that these students often operate under traumatic conditions, which may influence their behaviors (Bocharova & Melnik 2023).

One teacher reflected: “We often hear: ‘We don’t need to work hard, because we’ll go back home’—that attitude demotivates us” (K6).

Another shared: “Students from Ukraine misbehave, use their phones despite rules, and don’t take learning seriously. It’s discouraging” (K12).

The multidimensional nature of difficulties (K1) highlights the complexity of working with students who have both diverse cultural and educational needs. These statements point to the necessity of institutional support, such as intercultural assistants or additional funding for schools.

K1 reported: “I teach children from two different cultures, with special needs and disabilities. It’s extremely challenging without support”.

Perceived injustice and unequal treatment (K4, M2, K3, K10) reflect a significant perceptual issue—some teachers believe that support provided to Ukrainian students occurs at the expense of Polish students. What is lacking here is deeper reflection on the idea of educational compensation and equity. This can be interpreted as the result of a lack of communicative and cultural tools that would enable a better understanding of inclusive education’s purpose.

For instance, a teacher noted: “Ukrainian students have more access to extracurricular activities than our own students—it feels unfair” (K4).

Another stated: “We focus too much on foreign students and forget our Polish ones” (K3).

### D. The Process of Foreign Students’ Adaptation

The final area of analysis concerns the challenges associated with integrating students with migration experience. Trauma and language barriers (K9, M3) were identified as the main obstacles to the adaptation process. Respondents noted that children often struggle with difficult emotions, a lack of language proficiency, and cultural mismatch. At the same time, some teachers lack the necessary competencies to teach Polish as a foreign language or to work with traumatized children. This competency gap results in a lack of effective support, which may further complicate adaptation and lead to the social exclusion of the student (Bocharova et al. 2024).

As M3 shared: “Despite our efforts, we couldn’t help them enough. They lacked language skills and support—they were simply overwhelmed”.



K9 added: "They not only didn't know Polish, but were also emotionally exhausted. I wasn't sure how to reach them".

## CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative analysis of interviews with primary school teachers revealed a clear dichotomy in their attitudes toward multicultural education. One group of teachers demonstrated a constructive and inclusive stance: they viewed cultural diversity as enriching both for students and their own professional development. These teachers acknowledged challenges – such as language barriers and emotional needs of refugee students – but perceived them as opportunities for mutual learning and skill growth. They actively sought additional training and adopted inclusive strategies (for example, communal activities and peer support) to support all students equally.

In contrast, a second group of teachers expressed reservations about multicultural education. They emphasized that incoming students should adapt to the host culture and voiced concern that focusing on diverse students might disadvantage native Polish students. This perspective was accompanied by a defensive emphasis on preserving national culture and identity. Some in this group appeared to generalize negative traits to immigrant students, indicating a lack of understanding of the refugees' experiences.

Overall, the findings highlight the diversity of teacher attitudes. Importantly, even teachers in the supportive group noted that working in diverse classrooms is demanding and requires additional resources and skills. Both the optimistic and the hesitant perspectives have practical implications: teacher education programs should address these divergent views by providing targeted professional development. Strengthening teachers' intercultural competencies and supplying appropriate pedagogical tools (for example, language instruction methods and psychosocial support strategies) emerged as key needs.

These results can thus inform future training initiatives, aiming to build a school environment where all students – regardless of background – have equitable opportunities to learn. Finally, the study's conclusions can serve as a foundation for future research and educational initiatives. In particular, the evidence suggests the need for further efforts to support teachers in culturally diverse classrooms, ensuring that the challenges identified do not hinder inclusive education.

## DISCUSSION

Understanding these findings requires situating them in Poland's unique socio-historical context. Today, Poland remains one of Europe's most ethnically homogeneous nations. After World War II, border shifts and forced population transfers left the country overwhelmingly Polish and Catholic, and the Polish state never modeled itself on Western European-style multicultural societies. This legacy



means that many Polish teachers have had limited exposure to cultural diversity in their own lives (Cienki 2017). Reflecting this, public opinion surveys from 2015-2016 showed that Poles were initially suspicious of refugees: the share of citizens perceiving Middle Eastern and African asylum seekers as a threat jumped from 21% to 61% in that period. Such national attitudes likely reinforce caution among educators when they encounter foreign students (Hargrave 2023).

By contrast, the 2022 war in Ukraine provoked a strong outpouring of solidarity across Poland. Many citizens – and hence teachers – responded to Ukrainian refugees with compassion, motivated in part by fear of regional instability. Notably, the majority of Ukrainian refugees were women with children who intended to return home, framing this migration as a temporary humanitarian crisis. This shift in the public mood – from distrust of distant migrants to empathy for those fleeing a neighboring war – created a nuanced backdrop for teachers.

These broader dynamics translated directly into school settings. The sudden arrival of many non-Polish students (often traumatized by conflict) posed unprecedented practical challenges. Teachers found themselves largely unprepared: they lacked specialized pedagogical training (for example, in teaching Polish as a foreign language or adapting curricula) and had no experience addressing the psychological needs of war-affected children. In their words, the influx “caused some kind of chaos” in schools because standard routines and materials were not designed for such diversity. Reports from the field confirm that educators struggled to build new communication channels with students and families under these stressful circumstances (Gorski 2000).

Interpreting our results against this background helps explain the split in teacher attitudes. Those who expressed support for multicultural education may have been influenced by the prevailing narrative of Polish solidarity with Ukraine; they saw immigrant students as temporary guests deserving aid and inclusion. In contrast, the more skeptical teachers may have drawn on older, homeland-oriented values: Poland’s historical emphasis on a single national culture may predispose some individuals to protect the status quo. In effect, the defensive stance of the second group mirrors the broader trend of safeguarding cultural identity (as identified by Cienki 2017), while the open stance of the first group corresponds with the recent wave of empathy toward refugees.

In sum, the diversity of teacher perspectives can be traced to both historical and contemporary factors. The country’s post-war ethnic homogeneity and earlier resistance to multiculturalism help explain the protective attitudes observed, whereas the immediate experience of aiding Ukrainian refugees underlies the more inclusive views. Various attitudes of teachers towards students from different cultures may be rooted both in the historical and modern context. Recognizing this context is crucial: it suggests that supporting teachers will require not only skills training, but also addressing underlying beliefs and emotions shaped by Poland’s unique social history.

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