European Journal of Sustainable Development (2026), **15**, 2, 753-768 ISSN: 2239-5938
Doi: 10.14207/ejsd.2026.v15n2p753

Children and Forced Migration: Education as a Tool for the Integration of Refugees from Ukraine in Poland

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ABSTRACT:
The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 led to one of the largest waves of forced migration in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainian citizens, including a significant number of school-aged children and adolescents, were forced to leave their homes in search of safety, protection, and support in neighboring countries, including Poland. The influx of refugee children posed an unprecedented challenge to the Polish education system—the urgent and effective integration of hundreds of thousands of students with experiences of forced migration. This article aims to analyse the role of education as a key tool for the social integration of children with refugee experience into Polish society, as well as the barriers associated with it. In particular, it focuses on the impact of forced migration on children's functioning in the school environment. The article identifies the main elements and barriers to the integration process, such as the mental state of students, the preparation of teaching staff, language difficulties and the social attitudes of the host country.

Keywords: education, integration, forced migration, students with refugee experience, Ukraine.

1. Introduction

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to one of the largest waves of forced migration in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainian citizens, primarily women and children, were forced to leave their homes in search of safety, protection, and support in countries around the world, including neighbouring Poland. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the beginning of 2025 there were over 6.8 million Ukrainian refugees/forced migrants registered worldwide (including 6.3 million in Europe). The data indicate that the current situation is very different from previous refugee crises in European countries. The influx of refugees from Ukraine after 2022—described as the fastest exodus since the Second World War (UNHCR, 2025)—differs significantly from the 2015–2016 crisis in terms of children's access to education. In 2015, 1,820 refugee children, and 1,084 asylum-seeking children arrived in Europe, nearly half of whom came from Syria and Afghanistan. Most asylum applications were submitted in five countries—Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria, and Italy—which placed considerable strain on their educational systems (Kowalczyk, 2018). Access to education for this group was hindered by lengthy asylum procedures, the absence of coherent integration strategies, and complex legal, psychological, and economic factors (Essomba, 2017). In contrast, children from Ukraine were granted immediate temporary protection, freedom of movement, and rapid access to

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education within the EU—an unprecedented and far more effective response compared to the measures implemented during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis (Morrice, 2022).

In Poland alone, there were over 993,000 refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025). Currently, one-third of refugees from Ukraine are children, and over 70% of adults are women (OECD, 2023). A significant proportion of Ukrainian school-age children fleeing the effects of the war ended up in Poland, and their parents/guardians (mainly women) were faced with an extremely difficult choice regarding their further education. Some of the children immediately entered the Polish education system, a completely new environment for them, while others joined the system later, first continuing their education in the Ukrainian system. The arrival of such a large number of children from another country posed an unprecedented challenge for the Polish education system, which had not previously experienced such a large influx of foreign migrants. It had certainly not dealt with students with refugee experience on such a scale before.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Forced migrants from Ukraine in the Polish education system

Poland guarantees the right to education to all its residents, including immigrants. Unlike other education systems in Europe, Polish schools had very limited experience in educating migrants before 2022. Although Polish schools saw a steady increase in the number of students with migration experience, these were mostly children of economic migrants and returnees, and to a very small extent people who had been granted refugee status in Poland (Herbst & Sitek, 2023; Nazaruk et al., 2024). Data published in the Education Information System in Poland show that the number of foreign pupils in Polish schools and kindergartens in 2017 was approximately 30,000, while in 2020 it was approximately 85,000 (Jeżowski et al., 2024). This situation has been radically changed by the war in Ukraine, which has caused a significant exodus of the country's population. Poland, as a country bordering Ukraine, has accepted a significant proportion of Ukrainian forced migrants. An important factor in the decision to settle in Poland was the cultural and linguistic proximity (although a different alphabet is used) of the Polish and Ukrainian nations, as well as the fact that Ukrainians (mainly men) had been coming to Polish cities in large numbers for work before the outbreak of the war (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

In the face of the unprecedented scale of forced migration of Ukrainian citizens after 2022, the Council of the European Union decided to implement the so-called temporary protection mechanism for people fleeing Ukraine due to the war (European Council, 2022). On March 12, 2022, the Parliament of the Republic of Poland passed a special law aimed at facilitating, through various means, the arrival of Ukrainian citizens in Poland in connection with the armed conflict (Parliament of Poland, 2022). This law grants refugees' access to, among other things, free healthcare and family and educational benefits. As a result, the Polish education system was suddenly confronted with the need to rapidly provide young people from Ukraine with the opportunity to exercise their right to education (Jeżowski et al., 2024). To this end, a series of legislative and organisational measures were introduced to ensure access to education for refugee children and youth from Ukraine and to support their integration into the Polish education system.

Ukrainian children with refugee experience began attending Polish schools, but preparing schools for such an unimaginable number of Ukrainian students was a major challenge (Nazaruk et al., 2024). In Poland, every student living in a given area is required to attend school until the age of 18. With regard to students from Ukraine who arrived in Poland after 24 February 2022, continuing their education online in the Ukrainian system was initially considered equivalent to fulfilling their compulsory education in Poland (MEN, 2022). Some children only attended school in the Polish system, while others attended both the Polish and Ukrainian systems. Unfortunately, it was estimated that some children with refugee experience from Ukraine remained outside any education system (UNHCR, 2023).

The data indicates that four months after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, i.e. at the end of the 2021/22 school year, there were at least 356,000 Ukrainian children of school age with refugee experience in Poland. At that time, only 39% of them were included in the Polish education system (Chrostowska, 2024). It should be noted that this situation was related to the high uncertainty of forced migrants regarding the length of their stay in Poland, their place of residence, and the evolving war circumstances. Some of them returned to Ukraine, others moved repeatedly between Poland and Ukraine, and some moved to other countries or towns. Moreover, forced migration occurred during the school year. The Polish education system did not have data on how many students from Ukraine would start the school year in autumn 2022, how many would remain only in the Ukrainian system, and how many more potential students would arrive in Poland due to the ongoing war. This uncertainty made it difficult to organise and plan the work of schools and teaching staff (Szaban, 2022; Nazaruk et al., 2024). It is estimated that in the 2022/2023 school year, the number of school-age refugee students from Ukraine registered in Polish schools was approximately 135,000, but unfortunately, more than 50% of refugee children remained outside the Polish education system (Chrostowska, 2024).

In 2024, a fundamental shift occurred in the approach to the education of students from Ukraine with refugee experience. As of September 1, 2024, refugee children from Ukraine were required to complete a year of preschool preparation, compulsory schooling, and mandatory education within the Polish educational system—just like Polish students. Online education within the Ukrainian system was permitted only for students who, in the 2024/2025 school year, were enrolled in the highest grade level of the Ukrainian education system (MEN, 2024).

Data from the 2024/2025 school year indicates that 195,300 refugees from Ukraine were registered in various types of schools and kindergartens in the Polish Educational Information System (SIO). Of this group, 152,300 were school-aged children and youth, 31,200 were preschool children, and 11,900 were adult education participants. Ukrainian refugee students accounted for 3% of all pupils in Polish schools. In 58% of Polish schools, Ukrainian refugee students studied alongside their Polish peers. Only 2.4% of Ukrainian refugee students studied in preparatory classes, while the remaining 97.6% studied in regular classes. It is worth noting that, in addition to this, approximately 51,000 migrant students from Ukraine who arrived in Poland before the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, i.e., before 24 February 2022, also attended Polish schools (Świdrowska & Stano, 2025).

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2.2 Education as a tool for migrant integration

Migration (including forced migration) is a process that involves crossing not only geographic borders but, most importantly, entering into a different cultural world. While Ukrainians from the western part of the country often had prior experience living in European countries (e.g., for work purposes), those from central and eastern regions generally lacked experience with cross-border migration. For them, the need to leave suddenly due to the outbreak of war was a major shock and a journey "into the unknown" (Andrews et al., 2023). Regardless of the reasons that prompt people to settle in a new place, it is essential to develop and implement solutions that support their social inclusion, including structural, social, and cultural integration. One of the key areas where the integration of diverse cultural backgrounds takes place is the school environment, specifically the education system of the host country (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019; Tędziagolska et al., 2022; Młynek et al., 2023).

Education constitutes an integral part of the process of integrating forced migrants (He et al., 2017). It not only has an educational function, but also a social one. By providing access to learning, acquiring basic competencies, and gaining vocational qualifications, the education system enables forced migrants to develop individually and actively participate in the social life of the host country. School becomes a space for socialisation, where children with experience of forced migration also acquire knowledge about the norms, values, and rules of functioning in a given society, as well as develop socially and emotionally (De Paola & Brunello, 2016; Orłowska et al., 2022; Pagel & Edele, 2022). Education, regular school attendance and contact with peers can also be seen as a way for children who have experienced forced migration to 'return to normality'. Thanks to their participation in the education system of the host country, children integrate more quickly and often become guides for their parents in the new country (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020; Pagel & Edele, 2022; Tędziagolska et al., 2023; Nazaruk et al., 2024).

However, integration should be understood as a two-way process, as it should involve both people 'from within' and 'from outside' (Klarenbeek, 2021). Successful integration of refugee students requires the involvement of all members of the school community, building mutual relationships, inclusion in the everyday life of schools and local communities, and systemic support (Baranowska, 2020; Tędziagolska et al., 2023). The priority, therefore, should be the inclusion of refugee students in the social life of the school, while simultaneously encouraging the entire school community to embrace their presence (Orłowska et al., 2022; Nazaruk et al., 2024).

Education also provides a long-term goal in times of uncertainty and disruption, ensuring the qualifications and skills needed to navigate new realities. It offers an opportunity for success in the host society as well as in the country of origin in the event of return (Giancola & Salmieri, 2018; Morrice, 2022). Educational institutions play an important role in reducing the gap in educational attainment between the native population and immigrants (De Paola & Brunello, 2016). Children's educational pathways determine not only their future as competent adults, but also the future of society as an integrated whole (Ham et al., 2020). Education, combined with economic inclusion, supports learners' development towards becoming active members of civil society and is the best policy option for refugees and their host communities (UNHCR, 2019).

In the literature, three main models of migrant integration are distinguished—multiculturalism, interculturalism, and assimilation—which often overlap in practice and shape the foundations of educational policies. Multiculturalism assumes institutional support for diversity, interculturalism focuses on building intercultural relationships, and assimilation requires migrants to adapt to majority norms, especially linguistic ones. These approaches translate into educational solutions: universalist models ensuring equal access to schooling, and targeted models offering specialized support such as language courses or civic education (Pantić et al., 2025). In Europe, two main models of organizing the education of migrant students dominate. The separational model places children in separate preparatory classes for a defined period so they can acquire sufficient proficiency in the host-country language to participate actively in regular lessons; afterwards, they are transferred into the mainstream system (e.g., Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Sweden). The integrational model, by contrast, places students directly in mainstream classrooms while providing additional language lessons (e.g., Germany, Romania, the Netherlands, Poland). Both approaches have advantages and limitations: separation supports intensive language learning but may slow social integration, whereas integration increases peer contact but involves high linguistic demands and the risk of misclassification (Bielecka-Prus, 2024). In this context, the two-way integration framework emphasizes that effective migrant education requires both institutional adaptation to cultural diversity and active participation of migrant communities while respecting school norms—creating an environment conducive to learning and mutual relationships.

3. Methods

This article aims to analyse the role of education as a key tool for the social integration of children with refugee experience into Polish society, as well as the barriers associated with it. In particular, it focuses on the impact of forced migration on children's functioning in the school environment. The article identifies the main elements and barriers to the integration process, such as the mental state of students, the preparation of teaching staff, language difficulties and the social attitudes of the host country.

The basic method used was a literature review carried out following the research methodology proposed by J.W. Creswell (2014). This process consisted of: a general review of publications on the education of children and young people with refugee experience; selection of keywords; searching for publications containing selected keywords; reviewing selected publications; and further selection. At the end of this process, the content was organised and structured. An additional method used in the article was desk research. This approach involves collecting information referred to as "existing data," that is, statistical data and records of previously conducted studies, for example in the form of scientific articles and specialized reports authorized by recognized public and non-governmental institutions (Hofferth, 2005; Topolewski et al., 2023). The article draws on reports from qualitative and quantitative studies conducted among teachers, pedagogues, intercultural assistants, as well as Ukrainian students and their parents. These studies were carried out mainly by the Center for Citizenship Education (one of the largest Polish non-profit organizations supporting schools), as well as by CARE International in Poland, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Save the Children Poland.

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4. Results

4.1 Barriers vs. solutions related to the education of children and young people with refugee experience

Based on a review of the literature and the results of social research, several key barriers to the integration of children with refugee backgrounds can be identified. These include, among others, experienced trauma and the challenge of adapting to a new cultural environment, issues related to the language of the host country (lack of knowledge of the language or insufficient level of proficiency, as well as the need to learn in a language other than one's native language), attitudes of the host society (including peers), the sense of impermanence of the stay; the attitudes of people with refugee experience and the phenomena influencing them, the preparedness of teaching staff, systemic solutions (Saipova, 2022; Ciupińska, 2022; Tędziagolska et al., 2023; Klymenko et al., 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024; CARE et al., 2024; British Council, 2024; Jeżowski et al., 2024; Walczak & Wielecki, 2024; Świdrowska & Stano, 2025). The most important of these are discussed below.

4.1.1 Experienced trauma

An important factor related to the integration and adaptation of children and young people with refugee experience is their mental state. Some of them have had traumatic experiences related to direct exposure to war and other negative events, such as violence, threats to their lives, the need to flee their homes, or the death or abandonment of loved ones (Ryan et al., 2008; Klymenko et al. 2024, Nazaruk et al., 2024). As a result of these experiences, they may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Baranowska, 2020). The very fact of sudden, forced migration causes, among other things, a disruption in the lives of children, a break in their existing social ties, and culture shock in their new place of residence (Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2019; Saipova, 2022; Szaban, 2022; Klymenko et al., 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024). Another noticeable phenomenon is a kind of cultural grief, triggered by the loss of places, people, or objects of personal significance, which affects their psychosocial functioning (Baranowska, 2020; Jakavonyte-Staškuviene, 2023).

In addition to the stress of leaving their country, finding themselves in a new, unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment contributes to psychological tension. In this sense, most refugee students have to deal with the consequences of their traumatic experiences and leaving their country of origin, while also interacting with and learning about a second culture - an effort that brings its stressors (e.g. culture shock, lack of language skills, the gap between personal social expectations and the reality they face in their new location, unmet needs, feelings of alienation, etc.) (Buchanan et al., 2018; Saipova, 2022; Pagel & Edele, 2022).

The adaptation process requires them to engage enormous internal intellectual and emotional energy to adjust to their new reality (Saipova, 2022). All of these experiences may impact how children with refugee backgrounds fulfill their role as students. This can result in: difficulty concentrating on the material being taught, intense anxiety responses, trouble sleeping, feelings of alienation, outbursts of anger, a pessimistic view of the future, impaired concentration and attention. These situations can lead to academic

underachievement and a decline in motivation to learn (including learning the Polish language). All these consequences reduce the chances of integration into the school community and/or cause high absenteeism from school (Baranowska, 2020; Saipova, 2022; Jakavonyte-Staškuviene, 2023; Klymenko et al., 2024). Therefore, their new school must be a friendly and supportive environment.

Students with forced migration experience who face educational or emotional difficulties can receive support within the school system. The process begins with identifying their individual developmental and educational needs, as well as their psychophysical abilities, while taking into account environmental factors. Because of their specific life circumstances, such students should be covered by systematic pedagogical observation carried out by teachers in the course of everyday school activities. When signs of difficulty appear, school specialists conduct an in-depth assessment that helps determine both the student's strengths and the areas requiring support (Dolińska, 2025). The currently recommended tool is the school functional assessment, understood as a comprehensive process of analysing the student's everyday functioning across social, emotional, physical, linguistic, and cognitive domains, in line with the principles of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). When necessary, this assessment is supplemented with medical diagnosis, and its results lead to the development of an individual support plan that is regularly evaluated (Gajdzica et al., 2024). An important element of the process is cooperation with parents; in the case of students from Ukraine, this is facilitated by translating diagnostic tools into Ukrainian and Russian. By gathering information from multiple sources, the school can form a holistic understanding of the child's development and create conditions that support their full participation in school and social life. When pedagogical (functional) observation reveals difficulties that require specialist assessment, school professionals—such as the psychologist or special education teacher—conduct a more in-depth examination of the child's situation using appropriate diagnostic tools. If the parent decides to pursue an assessment at a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre, the role of school specialists and the class teacher is to cooperate with the centre throughout the diagnostic and post-diagnostic process in order to plan further support measures (Gajdzica et al., 2024; Dolińska, 2025). Research conducted among Polish teachers has shown that Ukrainian students with refugee experience have emotional, educational and behavioural challenges. The problems observed include: inability to cope with war trauma, depression, despair, anxiety, social withdrawal, denial, rejection by peers, and aggressive behaviour. Teachers express concern about the potential increase in problematic behaviours among refugee students in the absence of specialized support (Ciupińska, 2022; Nazaruk et al., 2024). Importantly, many Ukrainian families are separated (e.g. fathers have remained in Ukraine due to military mobilization). Often, parents (mainly mothers) caring for children find themselves in a difficult mental and financial situation and need support themselves (Jeżowski et al., 2024; British Council, 2024; CARE et al., 2024). Research shows that teachers actively develop the competencies needed to work with such students, most often through self-education, webinars, and in-school training. Importantly, the most common area of professional development in the past two years was educational work with a child who has experienced displacement or war-related trauma (44%), which confirms teachers'

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genuine commitment to preparing themselves to support students from Ukraine (Świdrowska & Walczak, 2025).

Providing pedagogical and psychological support tailored to the specific nature of the negative experiences encountered (e.g. war-related trauma), as well as to cultural and linguistic factors, is essential to help Ukrainian children and youth integrate into Polish schools and the broader cultural environment. There is also a need to extend psychological support to entire families, which would enable a comprehensive understanding of the situation and problems of a given household (Nazaruk et al., 2024; Klymenko et al., 2024; CARE et al., 2024; British Council, 2024; Jeżowski et al., 2024).

4.1.2 Language proficiency

Language is a means of communication and plays a key role in the integration process of migrants. Education, as a central element of integration, takes place largely through language (Heckmann, 2008). Proficiency in the host country's language is one of the main factors enabling the educational integration of refugee students, paving the way for their further social integration. A lack of knowledge of the host country's language limits peer interactions and participation in school activities (Nusche, 2009; Walczak & Wielecki, 2024).

Refugees' language skills in the host country determine their access to high-quality education, income, institutions, and social contacts in the broad sense (including in the private sphere). In the case of students with refugee experience, a lack of language proficiency can exacerbate trauma by causing feelings of isolation due to an inability to communicate, as well as negatively affecting the effectiveness of the learning process and the achievement of satisfactory educational outcomes. This, in turn, may lead to students withdrawing from the education system and reducing their motivation and satisfaction in this area, as well as hindering the provision of specialized support (e.g., psychological, speech therapy, etc.) that requires language skills (British Council, 2024).

In the initial period of attending Polish educational institutions, the lack of knowledge of the Polish language was a key factor hindering education and constituted the greatest barrier to integration among Ukrainian children with refugee experience (Ciupińska, 2022; Nazaruk et al., 2024; Walczak & Wielecki, 2024; British Council, 2024). It should be noted that at the beginning of 2022, there were virtually no Ukrainian language teachers in Polish schools. At that time, 8.8% of primary schools taught Polish as a foreign language (Herbst & Sitek, 2023). Ad hoc solutions in the initial period after the outbreak of the war (e.g., engaging students and intercultural assistants with knowledge of Polish and Ukrainian as translators, using translators, etc.) did not allow Ukrainian students to fully participate in the education process and assimilate the teaching material (Walczak & Wielecki, 2024; Jeżowski et al., 2024). An important support in the acquisition of language competencies was the guarantee of 6 hours per week of additional Polish language lessons for refugee students from Ukraine. In reality, however, this solution encountered many problems: a lack of teachers qualified to teach Polish as a foreign language, overcrowded language classes, difficulties in scheduling lessons, low attendance at these classes (partly due to a lack of stability and uncertainty regarding families' future decisions about their place of residence) (Walczak & Wielecki, 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024). A few educational institutions have attempted to support children with refugee experience in learning Polish

and understanding the content of teaching by additionally employing teachers with knowledge of Ukrainian or Russian and providing intercultural assistants (Orłowska et al., 2022; Jeżowski et al., 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024, Łoś, 2025).

Research indicates that many refugee students from Ukraine quickly achieved a communicative level of Polish language proficiency, but there are still those who, after more than two years in Poland, do not know Polish at all (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; Łoś, 2025).The mixed outcomes regarding Polish language acquisition raise important questions about the sustainability of this process. Teachers observe a positive correlation between regular attendance at additional Polish language classes and students' communication skills, ability to build peer relationships, and educational achievements (Tędziagolska et al., 2023). In the 2024/2025 school year, only 42% of refugee students from Ukraine participated in free, supplementary Polish language lessons offered at school (Świdrowska & Stano, 2025). The relatively low participation rate in these classes suggests the existence of structural inefficiencies. In many schools, attendance at these classes is low. The main reasons for students' lack of motivation include the absence of long-term plans to stay in Poland, educational overload, scheduling these classes early in the morning or late in the evening due to their supplementary nature, and the voluntary nature of participation (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; Świdrowska & Stano, 2025). Qualitative research shows that, from teachers' perspectives, the fundamental condition for the educational integration of students from Ukraine is acquiring proficiency in the Polish language, which enables both understanding the curriculum content and functioning in accordance with school rules. Teachers emphasize that they do not feel fully prepared to work in nationally diverse classrooms; however, in their view, the main difficulty is not a lack of professional competence but the language barrier, which most significantly hinders the integration process (Tędziagolska et al., 2023). This situation opens valuable ground for future research, particularly longitudinal studies examining the correlation between language proficiency and long-term educational attainment among refugee students.At the school level, the main challenge is the lack of adequate preparation of teachers to work with students with refugee experience. Conventional methods of teaching Polish are not usually adapted to the specific nature of teaching it as a foreign language, and the significant number of refugee students places an increased organisational burden on schools, which is not always matched by the appropriate competences of teachers and available educational resources (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; Chrosotowska, 2024; Świdrowska & Stano, 2025; Łoś, 2025). It is therefore important to improve teachers' skills in teaching Polish as a foreign language. Another solution could be to establish multicultural education teams in schools and provide materials (methodological and teaching materials for language learning and school subjects) to support both refugee students and their teachers (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; CARE et al., 2024; Łoś, 2025).

4.1.3 Attitudes of the host society

The integration of refugees (including children and young people) also depends largely on the attitudes of the native population (Heckmann, 2008; De Paola & Brunello, 2016). After World War II, Poland was largely monocultural, and the arrival of such a large number of people with refugee experience is a relatively new challenge (British Council 2024). A study conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre in Poland (CBOS)

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showed that Poles' attitudes towards Ukrainians are deteriorating. There has been a decline in sympathy towards them from 51% in 2023 to 30% in 2025 and an increase in hostility from 17% in 2023 to 38% in 2025 (CBOS, 2025a). Importantly, the percentage of Poles surveyed who declare their support for Poland's acceptance of Ukrainian refugees is declining, reaching its lowest level since the Russian invasion of 2022 in 2025 (50% compared to 57% in December 2024) (CBOS, 2025b).

After World War II, Poland was largely monocultural, and the arrival of such a large number of people with refugee backgrounds presents a relatively new challenge (British Council, 2024). A study conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) revealed a worsening attitude among Poles toward Ukrainians. Sympathy for them declined from 51% in 2023 to 30% in 2025, while aversion increased from 17% in 2023 to 38% in 2025 (CBOS, 2025a). Notably, the percentage of surveyed Poles who support accepting Ukrainian refugees into Poland is decreasing, reaching its lowest level in 2025 since the Russian invasion in 2022 (50% compared to 57% in December 2024) (CBOS, 2025b).

Children with refugee experience may experience isolation and a lack of acceptance from their peers due to cultural and language differences (Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2019). A refugee child becomes a participant in peer group relationships within a new environment, and the attitudes of individuals in that group can either help overcome or deepen the child's difficulties with adaptation and social integration (Saipova, 2022). Research conducted by the Center for Citizenship Education shows that the attitudes of youth aged 13–19 toward refugees depend primarily on the refugees' country of origin. Refugees from Ukraine are met with greater acceptance than those from the Middle East (e.g., Iraq, Syria), although inclusive attitudes prevail in both cases. Toward Ukrainian refugees, positive attitudes dominate in both private interactions (e.g., friendships) and public spaces (e.g., neighbourhood relations). Young Poles declared a willingness to engage with Ukrainian students at school—over 80% expressed interest in learning the basics of their language and offering educational support, and about three-quarters showed readiness to share a desk and learn about Ukrainian culture (Tędziagolska & Walczak, 2022). Despite these declarations, numerous social studies reveal a picture of two nationalities functioning in school not together, but side by side. Students generally sit with peers of the same nationality and tend to spend time in ethnically homogeneous groups. The lack of deeper integration within schools may lead to increased segregation, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and an increase in conflicts between students of different nationalities. Issues related to low level of peer integration and other related negative phenomena are particularly visible in mixed classrooms with a large number of students with refugee experience (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; British Council, 2024; CARE et al., 2024, Nazaruk et al., 2024). Studies involving students from Ukraine show that, although they appreciate the openness and kindness they encounter in Polish schools, they also experience stress related to adapting to a new environment, academic overload, difficulties in overcoming the language barrier, and cultural differences. They also report instances of xenophobia. Other research confirms that Ukrainian students sometimes face discrimination, intimidation, bullying, and hate speech both inside and outside of school, which further undermines their sense of safety and belonging (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; CARE et al., 2024; British Council, 2024).

There is a need to plan and implement systemic intercultural activities that could form the basis for the integration of Polish and Ukrainian students and promote attitudes of solidarity and cultural understanding (CARE et al., 2024). It is important to support peer integration among students of different nationalities—for example, through mixed groups working on projects outside the classroom, the creation of shared common rooms and clubs, and spending time together after school (such as sports and arts activities, workshops, trips, etc.) (Tędziagolska et al., 2023; British Council, 2024; CARE et al., 2024).

4.1.4 Preparation of Teaching Staff

The relationship between teachers and students with refugee experience, as well as the content of this interaction, is crucial for the educational and integration achievements of these students. Teachers are one of the key elements in the effective socialisation of refugee children (Heckmann, 2008; Walczak & Wielecki, 2024). Teachers help to integrate children into class and school community life, while educators support them in meeting their emotional needs (Jeżowski et al., 2024).

The situation faced by Polish schools and teachers after 24 February 2022 is unprecedented. Until then, interactions with students with refugee experience had not occurred on such a scale within the Polish education system. One of the weaknesses of the Polish educational system was the lack of teacher experience in working with children with migration experience (including forced migration) well as the absence of ready-made systemic solutions in this area. Another major challenge was the sheer number of children with refugee experience who suddenly entered the Polish education system (Orłowska et al., 2022; Szaban, 2022; Tędziagolska, et al., 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022; Herbst & Sitek, 2023; Nazaruk et al., 2024; Jeżowski et al., 2024).

At the beginning of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, Polish teachers were suddenly faced with the challenge of working with classes that included newly arrived children who did not know the Polish language or the Polish education system and who were often traumatised (Walczak & Wielecki, 2024). Research by Nazaruk et al. (2024) and Młynek et al. (2023) showed that teachers were often the first to encounter the problems and difficulties faced by refugee students and their families. The sudden influx of a large number of students with refugee experience significantly increased the demands placed on teachers and assigned them new responsibilities. In addition to adapting their teaching methods to the needs of this category of students, teachers were also expected to provide psychological and pedagogical support, promote peer integration, and take on additional activities (e.g., extra lessons for refugee students in subjects they found most challenging). A significant proportion of teachers had to modify their approach to conducting classes (British Council, 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024).

The attitude of the teaching staff toward cultural diversity in the classroom is also important. Research indicates that most teachers view it as an added value. At the same time, teachers point to numerous challenges associated with teaching in multicultural classrooms and tend to be critical of the impact of cultural differences on the teaching process. The majority of teachers declare that they developed their competences in working with such classes primarily by relying on their resources and personal efforts (Świdrowska & Walczak, 2025).

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Research conducted among teachers shows that they expect substantive support in their work in multicultural classrooms, e.g., strengthening their cultural competencies and preparing them to cooperate with the wider local community. During the research, teachers identified the need for professional support, including in the area of working with foreign students (such as addressing trauma-related effects, educational difficulties, and language barriers); access to courses and materials facilitating work in a culturally diverse classroom; guides and resources with strategies for enabling the participation of students with refugee backgrounds (e.g. those facing language exclusion in subject lessons); ensuring access to specialists (e.g. psychologists) who could support teachers in interventions, etc. (Szaban, 2022; Ciupińska, 2022; British Council, 2024; CORE et al., 2024; Nazaruk et al., 2024; Świdrowska & Walczak, 2025).

Teachers and experts are also calling for more effective integration of Ukrainian teachers and psychologists currently in Poland into the Polish education system. This would help to overcome numerous challenges, including language barriers and a shortage of specialists fluent in Ukrainian (British Council, 2024; CARE et al., 2024). As Heckmann (2008) notes, teachers from the same ethnic group can also improve the performance of refugee students by serving as role models for them.

5. Discussion and further research

The arrival in Poland of a significant number of Ukrainian children and young people with refugee experience has necessitated their rapid and effective integration into the Polish education system, which had previously had little contact with this type of student. This process has been fraught with numerous organisational, legislative, and pedagogical difficulties. The war in Ukraine is still ongoing, and it is impossible to predict when it will end. There is a high likelihood that new refugee students will arrive at schools, and a significant proportion of those who are already there will remain in the Polish education system. Therefore, the system must take into account the need to provide children from Ukraine with access to high-quality education that meets their needs and develop solutions that can be implemented permanently. Due to the forced nature of migration, special attention should be paid to the psychosocial support of Ukrainian children who have experienced trauma related to, among other things, conflict, displacement, the severing of social ties, and finding themselves in a culturally and linguistically different country. This also requires measures to support peer integration between Ukrainian and Polish students to build mutual understanding and counteract ethnic tensions. It is also crucial to support teaching staff in coping with the new challenges associated with educating children with refugee experience. Attention should also be paid to training a new generation of teachers and psychologists and preparing them to work with new groups of students. Effective integration of Ukrainian students with refugee experience into Polish schools requires not only declarations but, above all, the implementation of public policies based on measurable indicators that make it possible to monitor progress and translate recommendations into operational actions. A key role is played by indicators related to language acquisition, such as the average time needed to reach a communicative level (e.g., A2) or the proportion of students participating in additional Polish-language classes. Equally important are indicators concerning the course

of education, including comparisons of attendance rates between Ukrainian students with refugee experience and their Polish peers, the proportion of students repeating a grade in both groups, differences in external examination results (e.g., the eighth-grade exam), as well as comparisons of participation in remedial classes and the use of psychological and pedagogical support among Ukrainian and Polish students. Another important area is in-school integration, which can be monitored through indicators such as the number of discrimination incidents, the participation of Ukrainian students in extracurricular activities, projects, and school trips, and the number of intercultural initiatives organised by schools. Indicators related to teachers are also significant, including the number of teachers and assistants who speak Ukrainian or Russian and the proportion of staff trained to work with students with migration experience or in multicultural classrooms. Structural indicators such as the availability of Ukrainian-language teaching materials, the waiting time for psychological or pedagogical support, and the number of schools implementing long-term integration programmes could provide insight into whether integration is supported structurally rather than left solely to the initiative of individual schools.

Acknowledgment: This article was prepared within the framework of the project "Migrants from Ukraine in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. Socio-Economic Implications" financed by the Polish Minister of Science under the "Regional Initiative of Excellence" program for the years 2024–2027.

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