



## **Refugee students in Polish schools**

**Where do we stand as we approach the start of another school year?**

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

The report summarizes the second wave of research commissioned by the Center for Civic Education and carried out by a Polish-Ukrainian team of researchers in eight different kinds of schools in Poland. The project aimed to explore the needs and tensions in school communities hosting students from Ukraine to design long-term support for schools. The ethnographic study covered 160 interviews, observations, and visual studies.

**Ukrainian students appreciate the Polish school, but there exist dangers to their sense of safety and their educational integration.**

Ukrainian students appreciate the openness, kindness, and individualization in Polish schools. Still, they also talk about the stress of being in a new environment and studying, the excessive workload (especially for students learning simultaneously in two systems), difficulties overcoming the language barrier, cultural differences, and the experienced xenophobia.

**"Back to the normal" is a desired idea, but systemic solutions are needed to develop the teachers' competencies.**

Nearly a year and a half after the first refugees from Ukraine arrived, administrators' and teachers' narratives keep repeating the phrase "back to normal." What does it mean? Over the year, both groups have acquired experience and formulated different action patterns to treat Ukrainian students like Polish ones. Some teachers acknowledge the unique needs of Ukrainian students and try to individualize their work with them, but this is not a systemic approach. Schools put pressure on assimilation (in extreme cases – trying to forbid the use of Ukrainian in conversations between refugee students), which leads to neglecting the individual/unique educational needs of Ukrainian students and the dropping out of non-integrated people from the system. There are no systemic solutions for student integration. Moreover, teachers require better preparation for working in a multicultural environment, and administrators must improve their skills in managing a school with refugee students.

**Polish and Ukrainian students are functioning apart.**

We see a separative approach in schools, expressed in forming "foreign" classes" (classrooms made up exclusively of non-Polish-speaking students, following the Polish teaching curriculum in the Polish language) or seating Ukrainian students together. This poses a severe barrier to integration. Results are best when creating mixed classes with few foreign students. However, this solution is less realistic in some schools because of how many Ukrainian students were admitted. In effect, we see two communities functioning apart in the schools – a Ukrainian and a Polish community, with little or no room for integration.

## **The existing formula of preparatory classes is not fulfilling its function and isolates Ukrainian students.**

According to all of the stakeholders, preparatory classrooms in their current form are linked to a range of significant problems: too many students, often different ages, no integration and no contact with „living“ Polish, demotivating lack of grades, lack of solutions that enable smoothly transitioning to mixed classes. If the students stay in preparatory classes longer than necessary, they perpetuate the separative model. At the same time, they perform well as a solution for the first period of the students’ stay in Poland, providing a sense of security and enabling them to learn basic Polish. The attempts at several schools to combine preparatory classes with integration with mixed-class students in chosen classes do not work because of logistical difficulties.

## **Conscious and planned actions toward student integration are rare, leading to conflicts between nationalities.**

Integration is possible by appropriately managing mixed classes or organizing special events, volunteering days, extracurricular activities, or trips. In most cases, however, no actions support integration, or these actions are superficial and done on intuition. Neither are they seen as an essential element of school or class management. On the other hand, there are cases of conflict with nationality being the cause, and teachers lack the relevant competencies to solve them. Without introducing systemic, comprehensive integration activities to the schools, there is a high risk of further polarization of school communities, conflict escalation, and deteriorating quality of education.

## **What are the factors influencing the educational achievements of refugee students?**

The following factors improve the chances of educational success of Ukrainian students:

- speaking Polish (including the language of school education),
- learning in a mixed-nationality classroom headed by a teacher with the competencies relevant to working with a multicultural group.

On the other hand, the following factors hinder success:

- sense of temporariness on account of the family’s migration plans
- not knowing the educational track in Poland,
- learning with younger students,
- simultaneously learning in two systems,
- difficult economic situation. This constitutes a significant barrier to many Ukrainian families, especially women who came to Poland alone with their children.

### **Teaching Polish as a second language must be standardized.**

Ukrainian students differ in their command of Polish. The possibility of using 6 hours of extra Polish as a second language classes is viewed positively, but the potential of these classes is not fully exploited. This is above all due to the following:

- class times are difficult for the students, as this is an extra class added to their lesson plan (which results in low attendance),
- lack of suitably qualified teachers of Polish as a second language (which could reduce the effectiveness of the lessons),
- studying under two educational systems at the same time.

There is also a lack of coursebooks and didactic materials accessible to all students, as well as didactic aids for early elementary levels. Moreover, Ukrainian students are visibly overburdened by learning several languages simultaneously, with all these classes being given in Polish.

### **Learning in two educational systems hinders integration.**

It seems that students frequently study under two systems – Polish and Ukrainian. The choice to stay within two systems often depends on the family's migration plans and the child's age/ being in the final grades of a given educational system. In the case of students in the final grades of secondary school, focusing on the Ukrainian school is a rational decision, as it would help their continued education in Poland. There were instances of students struggling with education and integration who picked the Ukrainian school and opted out of the Polish one. Studying simultaneously in both systems is an enormous burden on the child. However, concentrating only on the Ukrainian school lowers integration and language learning opportunities and exposes the children to all the shortcomings of remote education.

### **Working in a multicultural classroom is a challenge to the teachers.**

Teachers view working in multicultural and ethnically diverse classrooms as a burden and challenge (loss of control, requires investment of time), not as something beneficial. Instead of seeing inclusion as enriching the school community, they believe integration equals assimilation.

Teachers do not feel adequately prepared to work with a culturally diverse class, and most don't feel they need to acquire new competencies helpful to teaching in such an environment. The predominant perception is that the main issues are the language barrier and attitudes of the teachers, not the shortage of the relevant professional competencies.

### **The grading systems are no longer fulfilling their essential functions.**

Teachers and administrators continue to display high compassion and desire to help. Compared to the previous year, they are more focused on going ahead with the teaching program and, in response to the needs of Polish students – they strive to level the grading standards for educational achievements and behavior. The lack of general guidelines and expectations of the principals and education authorities makes grading difficult, especially at the end of the year. In

effect, the grading criteria lack transparency and no longer serve the informative or motivating role, and the grading process leads to many tensions in the educational and social spheres.

**Even though some time has passed, the student's emotional needs remain unchanged.**

The emotional needs of Ukrainian students are the same as during the first wave of the study (safety, coping with problems, help in the treatment of depression, PTSD, etc.). Conditions typical for refugee children from regions affected by war are rarely diagnosed. Ensuring the emotional safety of refugee students is still seen as a priority. As time passes, it is assumed that the Ukrainian students' needs are the same as those of their Polish peers. The reason for this is, among others, the lack of awareness among the teachers about the different stages of cultural adaptation and the skills relevant to identifying specific psychological problems typical for refugee students.

**New emotional needs of Polish students have been identified.**

The current research wave revealed new needs of Polish students in connection with the changing social fabric. Living in an ethnically and culturally diverse society evokes all kinds of emotions that they cannot name or deal with. As a result, they are channeled into aggressive behaviors. The narratives about the war and the refugees in their family homes impact attitudes toward Ukrainian students.

**Psychological and pedagogical support remains a challenge.**

Due to the limited availability of Ukrainian-speaking specialists (although there has been an improvement here over the year) and the culturally-based reluctance to seek such help, the actual scale of the psychological problems of the refugee students is unknown. Furthermore, teachers are still not adequately prepared to spot worrying signals and support the students. Cultural assistants play an important role in emotionally supporting the students.

**Ukrainian students sporadically contact the Polish school.**

The quality of cooperation with the parents largely depends on their economic status (migrant mothers spend most of their time working, which hinders contact and involvement in their children's education) and their migration plans. Interactions with Polish parents are sporadic, and Ukrainian parents rarely take on any roles in parent councils at the schools.

**Cultural assistants take on many roles essential to the well-being and integration of refugee students.**

The assistants support students in their schoolwork, care for their emotional needs, and act as interpreters in interactions between teachers and parents, to list only the most common roles. At the same time, even though there are presently more cultural assistants in the studied schools, their number does not enable complete support to the students. The assistants still lack stable employment (ten-month employment contracts being the predominant practice), lack

adequate work conditions, and are not well-integrated into the faculty. All these factors hinder adequate support for the educational integration of foreign students.

**The most considerable administrative challenge for schools hosting refugee students is the lack of stable, systemic solutions.**

The prevalent model of action is to respond to the situations as they arise. Administrators point out difficulties in organizing class schedules due to shortages of qualified staff, the teachers' excessive workload, and the lack of adequate incentives for faculty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure effective education integration of refugee students in Polish schools, the following interventions are essential:

- standardizing integration policies and actions within education;
- developing a system for training administrators and teachers to equip them with skills relevant to working in a culturally diverse environment;
- introducing a system for monitoring teaching efficacy;
- promoting solutions that counteract exclusions.

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