Wspólnie tworzymy szkoły możliwości

Students from Ukraine in Polish schools – 2023/2024 school year

Qualitative research report

Authors: Magdalena Tędziagolska, Prof. Bartłomiej Walczak, Kamil M. Wielecki, Phd

Collaboration: Elżbieta Świdrowska

This report was prepared by the Centre for Citizenship Education in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

badania i działania

30 LAT CEO CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

unicef for every child

Dear Readers,

Polish schools are now home to over 150,000 children and adolescents who fled the war in Ukraine. Since September 2024, with the introduction of compulsory school enrolment for Ukrainian children and adolescents, a new group of students who previously operated outside the Polish school system has also joined the Polish educational community.

Polish schools have welcomed refugees with open arms, and the education authorities have developed and implemented institutional solutions that enable them to continue learning. Despite the lack of initial guidelines or systemic approaches, teachers and school management worked diligently to provide a supportive environment for learning and personal development.t. The past two years have been a remarkable success for Poland.

However, two years after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, the situation has evolved. Polish schools are becoming increasingly multicultural a trend that will continue in the years to come. This shift presents a tremendous opportunity bus also calls for long-term systemic solutions. Teachers need ongoing support from educational authorities, administrative bodies, teacher education centers and civil society organizations.

We firmly believe that the Polish education system can address ' the socio-emotional need of all students and foster a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students – Polish, Ukrainian and other nationalities. Achieving this will require creating an inclusive environment in all schools.

We are pleased to present the report titled "Students from Ukraine in Polish Schools - School Year 2023/2024," produced in collaboration between CEO and UNICEF.

This report is the outcome of a nationwide qualitative study, conducted for the third time since the escalation of the war in Ukraine. It provides valuable insights into the current state of schools, shedding light on how Polish schools are meeting the needs of both Polish and Ukrainian students, while highlighting areas that require focused attention and further support.

Based on the data collected in more than 140 interviews, the report formulates a series of recommendations - key directions for change: standardizing school practices for educational integration,

- supporting teachers and administrators in working with culturally diverse environments
- promoting solutions that foster school integration and counteract discrimination and exclusion
- building an effective psycho-emotional support system for children and youth with migration and refugee background

We are confident that the findings of the report will enable us to support teachers and school leaders more effectively, build inclusive systemic solutions for educational integration and ensure that all students in schools reach their full educational potential.

Francesco Calcagno
Chief of Education
UNICEF Refugee Response
Office in Poland

Jędrzej Witkowski
Chairman of the board
Center for Civic Education

CONTENTS

This table of contents is interactive. Clicking the logotype ceo CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ on the slides takes the reader back to the table of contents.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the qualitative research, which consisted of eight case studies conducted in schools. Each case involved school observations and interviews with teachers, principals, students, and parents/guardians from both Poland and Ukraine, as well as non-teaching staff and the broader school community (including the governing body and centres offering psychological and pedagogical counselling). A total of 144 interviews (with approx. 254 interviewees) were conducted, along with 16 days of observations across eight schools, providing in-depth insights into the situation of students from Ukraine in Polish schools.

The process of 'normalization' observed in the previous school year is intensifying. The presence of students from Ukraine has become part of everyday school life. No longer described as a separate challenge, as it was shortly after the Russian invasion, it is now embedded in the broader context of the Polish school system: staff shortages, curriculum overload, and lack of psychological support. Students from Ukraine are identified as another group with special educational needs; the 'preferential' rules created for them on the basis of nationality have disappeared.

The students themselves, particularly those who arrived in Poland shortly after the outbreak of the full-scale war, seem to be adapting well to the Polish school system. They are more familiar with formal and informal rules. Apart from a few exceptions, they tend to communicate more easily in Polish, are more likely to establish relationships with their Polish peers, and are actively involved in classes and school life. In terms of learning, they appreciate the support from teachers and peers, and the variety of activities. However, they feel overloaded, not just with learning, but also with the additional activities (learning the language, household chores etc.)

Although the rotation of students from Ukraine in schools has decreased, the strong sense of temporariness persists. Young people do not know whether to associate their future with Poland or wait for their return to Ukraine. This affects their involvement in education and integration.

Some Polish students demonstrate discriminatory behaviour, which negatively impacts the sense of security, integration, and the effectiveness of learning of their Ukrainian peers.

Assimilationist rather than integrationist attitudes and practices are increasingly present in schools. This trend is particularly evident in expectations that students from Ukraine refrain from speaking Ukrainian on school premises and in the disappearance of Ukrainian symbols from the school space. However, these attitudes and actions are often unintentional, stemming from a lack of training or competence in teaching within a multicultural environment.

Preparatory classes – viewed positively in the first year of the study, more controversially in the second – seem to attract more criticism than positive comments in this edition. This is mostly related to how this solution is implemented in practice. Respondents pointed to students being isolated from the Polish community, slower learning of Polish compared to mixed classes, excessive teacher workload, and significant organizational difficulties. At the same time, they saw this type of class as a solution in the event of a one-time admission of a larger number of students unfamiliar with the Polish language.

Two of the surveyed schools had **so-called 'foreign classes',** composed entirely of non-Polish students and implementing the standard curriculum. This solution was clearly perceived as ill-judged: rather than helping address the existing challenges, it intensified them. In particular, respondents noted the accumulation of communication and educational difficulties, as well as the strong isolation of foreign students from the school community.

Executive Summary

According to our research, teachers tend to overestimate the linguistic competence of students from Ukraine. The language of instruction plays an important role in teaching and integration, but awareness of this fact in schools is low.

Additional lessons in Polish as a second language (PSL) do not fully meet their purpose: groups are too diverse in terms of age and proficiency level, and there is a shortage of teachers qualified to teach Polish as a second language in a motivating and engaging way. Moreover, the teaching hours are inconvenient for students, with classes scheduled either very early or very late.

The educational plans of students from Ukraine depend on their family situation and gender. Choosing a path that offers opportunities to either quickly acquire a profession and enter the labour market or pursue general education to attend university is influenced by the students' family situation.

Male students more frequently declare opting for the 'short' path than female students. In addition to the aforementioned sense of temporariness, another factor hindering rational decision-making is unfamiliarity with the Polish education system. As a result, some students applying to vocational schools, for example, talk about studying medicine in the future. Support from the school plays an important role here, both in the form of individual career counselling and information meetings for students and their parents. However, educational pathways are ultimately shaped by external examinations. The language barrier and the limited time of education in Poland affect exam results, which in turn determine further educational choices.

At the end of the 2023/24 school year, the inclusion of students from Ukraine in compulsory education was considered justified by principals, teachers, students from Ukraine, and parents. Two main arguments were consistently raised: to combat the exclusion of individuals outside the system and to make the situation more transparent and fair. However, these arguments were accompanied by concerns about the large influx of students who do not speak Polish and the challenges of integration, especially in secondary schools.

As in previous editions of the study, there is a persistent sense of helplessness among teachers in addressing trauma and other specific emotional issues faced by refugee students. The lack of preparation was not only reflected in teachers' statements but also clearly visible during the observed lessons. Many teachers still lack knowledge about trauma and its effects on children. Similar helplessness was expressed by school psychologists. The availability of specialists who speak Ukrainian or Russian has not improved either. This issue is further compounded by the cultural reluctance of students from Ukraine (and their parents) to seek specialist help. Support is provided by specialists employed by NGOs, yet such opportunities are only available in certain cities. Importantly, teachers are not always aware of the support available from local centres offering psychological and educational counselling, which employ specialists who speak the students' language.

Executive Summary

The following factors contribute to fostering a sense of security among students from Ukraine: the presence of Ukrainian school staff (though at the time of research none of the schools had an intercultural assistant), the creation of a friendly space where students can gather during breaks, and the informal relationships they build with teachers.

Students from Ukraine demonstrate varying levels of integration. Among the well-integrated students, there are cases of concealing their Ukrainian identity, which may be a side effect of the assimilationist approach applied (sometimes unconsciously) by schools. Students from Ukraine consciously adopt an assimilation strategy as a way of coping within the majority group. The students' individual characteristics, their experiences, family situations – particularly the involvement of their parents in their education – as well as school-related factors, such as teachers' openness and relationships with Polish students, all influence the integration process.

However, well-integrated students from Ukraine are in the minority. The most common scenario is the parallel existence of two separate student communities. Students from both Poland and Ukraine show little willingness to integrate, feeling frustrated after previous unsuccessful attempts. Their separation is further reinforced by the greater number of students from Ukraine in schools, the absence of school initiatives supporting integration, and teachers' low competence in multicultural education. In contrast, integration is positively influenced by participation in programmes focused on multiculturalism and the inclusion of students from Ukraine in pro-social activities, such as volunteering.

As in previous editions of the study, **teachers did not see conflicts between students as ethnically motivated.** However, **when conflicts did arise, they triggered ethnically differentiating language** (typically initiated by the majority group, i.e. Poles). The isolated cases of cross-discrimination, where material status and/or sexual orientation were added to nationality, are a concerning development. Another potentially dangerous trend is the increase in discriminatory behaviour observed by teachers among the youngest Polish students.

Ukrainian parents generally hold positive views about Polish schools, much like Polish teachers do about Ukrainian parents. Thanks to improved knowledge of Polish, the quality of communication has (generally) improved. Ukrainian parents are more willing to use the electronic class register, though some still find it challenging. Reported problems primarily stem from poor communication, often due to single parents being unavailable during school hours.

Executive Summary

One consequence of 'normalizing' the presence of students from Ukraine in Polish schools is the lack of a multicultural approach in institutional management. Differences are addressed at the level of special educational needs or peer conflicts, with no systemic approach to integration in sight. While some adequate measures were observed during the study – such as incorporating multiculturalism in the prevention and education programme, establishing a special team, promoting (narrowly understood) Ukrainian culture at special events, or organizing integration trips – these were of an individual nature. As a result, schools, often unintentionally, apply assimilationist measures – multicultural management and educational integration are lacking. On the other hand, refugee students from Ukraine may count on material support from schools, particularly those working closely with social welfare centers. In other schools, knowledge of the material situation of students is incidental.

A general conclusion from the study is a specific duality in the approach to cultural diversity. While schools generally describe multiculturalism as a valuable principle, in practice, it is usually replaced by assimilationist practices. In other words, diversity is acknowledged as a positive assumption, but in reality, the emphasis is on minimizing cultural differences.

The key partners for schools in supporting refugee students are local government institutions: centres offering psychological and educational counselling, social welfare centres, and libraries. A recurring observation is that schools are often unaware of the support available in their communities. For example, in one school, respondents noted a lack of specialists speaking Ukrainian, even though such a specialist had been employed for several months at a local counselling centre. While NGOs play a significant role, their presence is limited to certain areas, and in smaller localities, their involvement is mostly sporadic.

Executive Summary: Comparison of the 2023/24 and 2022/23 School Years

WHAT HASN'T CHANGED

Insufficient background in multicultural education and failure to incorporate multiculturalism into school and class management

Teachers' insufficient knowledge of trauma and its impact on students

Inability to address the psychological needs of students who are war refugees

Lack of psychological support in a language accessible to students

WHAT HAS CHANGED

The influence of an assimilationist approach to integration is evident at many levels

Deepening 'normalization': a shift from viewing students from Ukraine as war refugees to categorizing them as a group with special educational needs

Reduced mobility of students from Ukraine

Students from Ukraine have a better understanding of Polish realities, including how Polish schools function, and are more settled in Poland

Increased separation between students from Poland and Ukraine

Rise in discriminatory attitudes among the youngest students

Improved communication with the parents of children from Ukraine

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure full implementation of compulsory education for all children residing in the Republic of Poland, while adapting the support provided by schools to their specific educational needs.

Support school authorities in verifying the implementation of compulsory education by refugee students residing in the area. Conduct systematic monitoring of school enrolment. Improve data collection in the databases of the Educational Information System, the Social Insurance Institution, and the PESEL database. A system should also be set up to allow parents to easily report cases of refusal to enrol their children in schools.

2. Establish **a system for managing the cultural and ethnic diversity** of students at the systemic level.

Issues of educational integration and the management of cultural and ethnic diversity should be incorporated into all elements of educational policy (including the core curriculum, assessment system, examination system, and teacher education and training). The Ministry of Education's activities in this area should be strategically planned in dialogue with all stakeholders, and adequately funded. Educational integration initiatives should be a significant part of the state's emerging migration policy and strategy.

The diversity management system should be informed by ongoing research to assess the quality of education and the well-being of foreign students, as well as evaluation of policies in this area.

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Support the development of all teachers' competencies in working in culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms and enhance **school principals' competencies in managing diversity.**

The competencies needed by teachers to teach in culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms and the principal competencies to manage school's diversity must be precisely defined.

The support for development in these areas should be a part of the in-service training offer for teachers and principals in public and private professional development centres. These activities should receive financial support from the state.

These elements should also be included in the teacher training curriculum.

Schools with the highest number of foreign students should be offered whole-school support programmes to ensure that they are well prepared to support educational integration.

4. Increase the number of intercultural assistants in schools and professionalize the teaching profession.

Efforts should be sustained to secure funding that allows for increasing the number of intercultural assistants employed in schools. Standards for the employment and functioning of intercultural assistants (including their roles and tasks, preparation for the profession, and the number of children they look after) need to be defined. It is essential to develop programmes of courses and postgraduate studies for future assistants, and support current assistants with an in-service training system.

5. Symbolically recognize the efforts of teachers, school principals, and local government units that have significantly contributed to supporting educational integration in recent years.

In the past two years, the greatest burden of addressing the special needs of foreign students has fallen on teachers and school principals. Their efforts led to the successful enrolment of over 150,000 new students in a short period. Recognizing the contributions of teachers and principals to educational integration is vital. Highlighting best practices in schools can positively influence the narrative surrounding inclusive education.

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Professionalize the teaching of Polish as a second language (PSL) and unlock the potential of this school subject.

The core curriculum for Polish as a second language and the professional qualifications of teachers of this school subject should be defined. Currently practicing PSL teachers should be required to complete in-service courses in glottodidactics. New teachers should acquire the knowledge and competences as part of their postgraduate studies in glottodidactics.

Establishing the core curriculum should allow for the authorization of textbooks for Polish as a second language, with public funding.

PSL level tests should be created and disseminated to allow for the division into groups and the adaptation of classes to the language level.

It would be advisable to consider making it compulsory for foreign students to attend PSL classes.

All teachers should be trained in adapting the language of education to various levels of students' proficiency in Polish.

7. Introduce and disseminate activities in schools focused on integration, multicultural and anti-discrimination education, and civic education.

Educational institutions should be encouraged to embed anti-discrimination and integration activities into everyday practice. It is crucial that every subject teacher employs inclusive strategies, methods, and techniques that foster cooperation and mutual understanding among students. Intercultural and anti-discrimination activities should be included in prevention and education programmes. Providing anti-discrimination workshops for all school staff and students should be promoted.

Additionally, establishing a system for reporting and responding quickly to incidents of discrimination, violence, or bullying is necessary.

SYSTEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Build an effective psycho-emotional support system at schools for students with migration and refugee background.

Ensure foreign students have greater access to school psychologists and pedagogues, especially those who speak Ukrainian. It is essential to prepare teachers and school psychologists/pedagogues, as well as non-teaching staff, to work with children with war trauma, migration, and refugee experiences. This should be an ongoing component of in-service training and professional development for teachers. Mental health and well-being components for all students, including foreign students, should be integrated into prevention and education programmes and the curriculum of selected school subjects (such as physical education, health education, and education for safety). Strengthening the cooperation of educational institutions with organizations providing psycho-emotional support to families with migrant or refugee background is necessary. It may be worthwhile to create a database of institutions providing such support and pathways to access specialist support.

9. Develop and disseminate **standards for supporting educational integration in schools.**

Create standards that address how foreign students are admitted to schools, how preparatory classes are established and function, and how students with migration experiences are taught, assessed, integrated into the school community, and involved in school activities with their parents and guardians. The standards should also include measures to counteract and reduce the isolation of foreign students (e.g., by avoiding the creation of so-called 'foreign classes'). These standards should be developed in cooperation with schools as good practices and their implementation should be obligatory in subsequent years.

10. Engage in dialogue with the Ukrainian side to develop implementable solutions enabling **students from Ukraine to maintain their national identity**

Continue the dialogue on organizing activities that help students from Ukraine maintain their national identity. Polish law allows embassies and cultural and educational associations to organize such activities, requiring schools to make their facilities available. Given the war in Ukraine and the significant number of students from Ukraine in Polish schools, it is reasonable to consider increasing the Polish state's support for such activities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & SOCIAL CONTEXT

Methodology

THE SUBJECT OF THE STUDY:

The needs of members of the school community in a new situation: a culturally diverse school attended by migrant and refugee students in the 2023/24 school year.

Research areas:

- Didactics,
- Student-student, teacher-student, and teacher-teacher relationships, including efforts to foster inclusive classrooms and school communities,
- Extracurricular activities of students from Ukraine,
- Cooperation between the school and the parents of children from Ukraine.

8 CASE STUDIES

16 DAYS SPENT IN SCHOOLS

254 INTERLOCUTORS

144 INTERVIEWS

The adopted methodology (case studies using the ethnographic method) provides a comprehensive insight into the daily functioning of schools and the real needs of students, teachers, and principals in the context of multiculturalism. Unlike other studies, our approach reveals the complexity and lived experiences of participants, taking into account the dynamic nature of integration. This enables us to formulate specific recommendations.

The study was designed and implemented by the Badania i Działania [Research and Action] research team between May and July 2024.

CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

unicef for every child

Methodology

CASE STUDY (CS)

INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

Principal, teachers, pedagogue/ psychologist, intercultural assistants, students and parents of students from Poland and Ukraine, non-teaching staff.

Broader school context: NGOs, governing bodies, centres offering psychological and educational counselling, etc.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Observation, visual surveys, informal conversations

INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS

To consult research conclusions and recommendations

IN THE SAMPLE:

- 3 schools with preparatory classes
- 2 schools with 'foreign' classes
- 4 schools from the previous edition of the study and 4 new schools

The schools surveyed varied in both the number and proportion of students from Ukraine. In two schools, refugee students from Ukraine made up no more than 5% of the total student body (2% and 4%, respectively); in two others, they comprised 6%, in one school 8%, in another 15%, and in two schools 25%.

Before the onset of the full-scale war, these schools had small numbers of international students, including some from Ukraine; however, these students were typically the only ones from their country in each classroom.

The survey included teachers who work directly with students from Ukraine: both tutors and subject teachers (Polish language and literature, PSL, history, biology, physics, mathematics, music, physical education, and early primary education, among others).

	Large cities	Smaller cities
Primary school	2 CS	3 CS
Secondary school (general secondary school, technical school, vocational school)	1 CS	2 CS

unicef
for every child

Methodology

PRE-WAR AND WARTIME MIGRATION

In the report, we distinguish between the processes related to migration occurring before and after February 24, 2022. Due to the lack of information on the respondents' status, the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably.

INTEGRATION MODEL

In the study, we refer to the Model of Educational Integration developed by the Centre for Citizenship Education (CEO). Its conceptual framework was applied to the school context and is reflected in the structure of our report.

As a general framework for the integration strategies, we used one of the most popular typologies in the migratory studies (Aan et al., 2012, Bertossi, 2007). The integration strategies spin from multiculturalism (the "British" model) to assimilation (the "French" model).

PREPARATORY, FOREIGN, AND MIXED CLASSES*

Preparatory classes, preparatory classrooms (oddziały przygotowawcze) – classrooms established for foreign students who face challenges with the Polish language and integration into the Polish educational system. Their purpose is to support students in learning the language and facilitate their full integration into Polish schools. They are governed by the 2016 Education Law and the 2022 Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens. Their curriculum should be tailored to the students' needs, with a strong emphasis on intensive Polish language instruction.**

Foreign classes, foreign classrooms (*klasy cudzoziemskie*) – classes attended exclusively by foreign children, different from the preparatory classes format. They are relatively homogeneous in terms of age and follow the Polish curriculum for a specific level of education.

Mixed classrooms, mixed classes – classrooms with Polish and foreign students.

QUOTATION DESCRIPTIONS

Quotations are coded using a three-part system: the first part indicates the type of school (PS – primary school, GS – general secondary school, VS – technical/vocational school), the second part specifies the method used (e.g., IDI), and the third part indicates the category of respondents (e.g., UA parent = Ukrainian parent).

To ensure the anonymity of schools and individuals participating in the study, codes for schools and individual respondents have been removed from some descriptions. For the same reason, only fragments of codes are presented in certain instances. The respondents' names have also been changed.

GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

This report employs gender-neutral language.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this presentation comes from the study.

* Using the term 'integrated classroom' to describe a class where foreign students work alongside their peers from the host country may be confusing. Given the specific use of the term 'integrated classroom' in the Polish educational system, we have chosen to use the term 'mixed classroom' instead.
** https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/zasady-organizacji-oddzialow-przygotowawczych [retrieved: 1 September 2024]

RESEARCH CONTEXT: CHALLENGES FACING POLISH SCHOOLS

When describing the situation of refugee children, it is important to account for the challenges faced by Polish schools.

Selected aspects relevant to understanding the results of this study.

STRIKES, PANDEMIC, WAR...

The teachers' strikes of 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the escalation of the war in Ukraine have had a significant impact on the condition of Polish schools, including staff welfare. Principals report an increase in sick leave among teachers, and teachers speak of burnout and low mental resilience.

STAFF SHORTAGES

Difficult working conditions, low social prestige, and low salaries discourage people from entering the profession.* Additionally, a significant proportion of teachers are either approaching retirement age or already past it, which means the problem of staff shortages will become worse.

CURRICULUM OVERLOAD AND EXAM PRESSURE

Teachers and students are overburdened. Teachers face a dilemma: whether to focus on preparing students for exams or to nurture their overall development.

INSUFFICIENT AVAILABILITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Schools either have vacancies for the position of psychologist or have specialists with limited availability (e.g., once a week). According to a GrowSPACE Foundation study, there is one psychologist for every 785 students, and 450 municipalities did not employ a single person for this position.*

CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)

Working with students with special educational needs is becoming increasingly challenging. In one of the primary schools participating in the study, 120 students out of 400 had certificates from educational and psychological counselling centres (e.g., for developmental dyslexia). In another school, more than half of the eighth-graders had such certificates. To address the needs of these students, the principal had to set up eight committees to organize exams.

*According to estimates from various sources, there was a shortage of approx. 20,000 teachers in Polish schools during the 2023/24 school year. Cf: https://edukacja.rp.pl/oswiata/art40932681-wakatow-w-szkolach-tyle-samo-co-przed-rokiem-co-osmy-nauczyciel-chce-odejsc (retrieved: 2 August 2024).
** https://www.rp.pl/prawo-dla-ciebie/art38981151-uczniowie-potrzebuja-wsparcia-psychologow-ale-tych-bardzo-brakuje (retrieved: 2 August 2024).

STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE
IN THE POLISH SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The presence of students from Ukraine has become part of the schools' daily routine.

Students from Ukraine...

... are treated like Polish students.

Many principals and teachers emphasize the growing convergence of students from Poland and Ukraine, both in terms of language and in their responsibilities, rules, and the way they function. The gradual loss of cultural distinctiveness among students is viewed as the desired direction. As a result, 'Ukrainian identity' is becoming less visible: teachers note that students from Ukraine are blending in with their Polish peers, which reinforces their role as full members of the school community.

... are just another group of students with special educational needs.

The prevailing perception during the 2023/24 school year is that students from Ukraine are simply part of a broader school community facing common challenges, such as cognitive overload and inadequate psychological support.

Like other students with special educational needs, they require a tailored pedagogical approach.

> (...) *These kids have integrated so well into this class (...) they absorbed everything like a sponge, even the Polish language, so they really speak fluently now and, to me, they're perfectly normal here* (laughs) *and it's perfectly normal that we have them here in class.* [PS2 teacher]
>
> *Now we're at a stage of stabilization, everything has come together. [PS5 IDI student council supervisor]*

> *The mental health of children and young people is an issue across Poland. It is an issue at our school too. Of course, children from Ukraine may also need assistance. But they are not the only ones. We think about all students. [PS4 IDI teacher]*

Schools are concentrating on addressing the most urgent challenges.

The issues of children from Ukraine have faded into the background.

What was still important last year is no longer a priority this year. In a sense it's still important, it's just that it ***got lost in the depths of everyday school problems*** *(...). [PS1 IDI principal]*

HOW IS ‘EQUAL TREATMENT’ MANIFESTED

Teachers emphasise that they no longer extend any form of 'preferential treatment' to students from Ukraine, whether in terms of behaviour or education.

NO MOBILE PHONES IN THE CLASSROOM

In most schools, students from Ukraine are no longer permitted to use mobile phones during lessons. In previous years, they were allowed to use them for translation purposes. However, as noted by our respondents, this privilege was often abused – for instance, to cheat during tests – leading to a sense of unfairness and unequal treatment among Polish students.

CLASSES IN POLISH

Teachers do not prepare special materials, and lessons are conducted entirely in Polish. Students from Ukraine receive the same assignments during tests.

EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW

Students from Ukraine face the same consequences as Polish students when they violate school rules or break the law. For the first time in our research, there were reports of crimes committed by refugee students (some of whom are already of legal age), such as drug dealing. Schools reported these incidents to the police, just as they would for crimes involving Polish students. Some students were placed under the supervision of a probation officer. However, as one principal noted, crimes are, paradoxically, also a sign of normality.

> *It’s the same as with Polish children. We have children who are well-behaved, who study and go [to school], and we have children who, colloquially speaking, don’t care and don’t go [to school]. Whether it’s Ukraine or not doesn’t really make a difference here. (...) we face the same problems as any school. Whether it’s cigarettes, drugs, they appear here, there, and everywhere.* [GS7 IDI principal]

TEACHERS' NEEDS AND PRACTICES

Just like last year…

TEACHERS IN MIXED CLASSROOMS

- Teachers using active methods (e.g., project-based learning, group work, peer assessment) **recognize their value in multicultural classrooms**. This approach helps students from Ukraine, among others, to acquire knowledge and skills more easily.
- They view students from Ukraine as **having special educational needs (SEN)** and feel that an individual approach is necessary. However, they lack the capacity to provide this due to the needs of Polish students, including those with SEN, curriculum requirements, etc.

TEACHERS IN FOREIGN CLASSROOMS AND PREPARATORY CLASSES

- They feel undervalued by the management and other teachers.
- They find it challenging to teach in preparatory departments, especially with classes that are diverse in both age and language proficiency

What has changed compared to 2023/24

- Viewing students from Ukraine as part of the broader SEN (special educational needs) group reframes the challenges of working with them. Actions are no longer directed at refugee students as a separate group but as a subgroup within the SEN category.
- Teachers are using fewer methods to individualise learning and support the specific needs of foreign students.
- For the most part, lessons are conducted with the assumption that students from Ukraine have sufficient knowledge of Polish to participate and learn effectively.
- Teachers are focused on covering the curriculum and are reluctant to slow down the pace of learning.
- There is increasing frustration among teachers, who feel that their efforts to teach and educate students from Ukraine are not producing the expected results.
- Many feel they are not coping well and believe they made mistakes in their approach to students from Ukraine ('we were too lenient').

UKRAINIAN IDENTITY IN SCHOOLS

One new theme in the research are the differing attitudes of students from Ukraine towards expressing their identity.

Some students want to commemorate important anniversaries, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while others avoid Ukrainian elements in school celebrations, such as songs or cultural stories. Students also have different approaches to learning about their own history.

The students' reluctance to express their Ukrainian identity has several causes:

WAR MEMORIES

Talking about Ukraine brings back memories of the war, which students prefer to avoid.

Ukraine is mentioned at assemblies or at the end of the school year... And immediately the war comes to mind. (...) I don't want them to talk about it anymore. I'm not going to be part of that, because I've kind of got a new life and I'm trying... to live in the here and now, not in what was or what will be." [PS3 TRI UA students student council]

We don't mention it because I think, for every Ukrainian, such a conversation will be painful and unpleasant. [PS3 TRI UA students student council]

A Polish schoolgirl from another school also points out that discussions about the war in Ukraine are more often led by Poles than by Ukrainians themselves.

(..) during some school assemblies, it's often a bit annoying and not very respectful – this forceful reference to the war. Poles speak as if they know more than the Ukrainians about the war and so on. [PS5 FGI PL students]

THE DESIRE TO BE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

Students from Ukraine do not want to publicly highlight their Ukrainian identity, as they feel it signals special treatment. These actions result from good intentions of the principal or teachers, yet they're somehow stigmatizing. Students from Ukraine want to be treated like everyone else.

MULTICULTURALISM IS HARDLY VISIBLE IN THE SCHOOL SPACE

In the physical space of the visited schools, there is **little information directed at Ukrainians** (both students and parents) **in their native language**. Ukrainian elements, symbols, or words of support are also largely absent.

Some schools display classroom signs in Ukrainian, but there are fewer of them than last year. These seem to be the remains of past efforts.

References to Ukraine in school communications are scarce. For example, among the photographs displayed in the corridors, only a few were related to Ukraine, showing Polish students volunteering in a campaign to help Ukraine.

The most common information source in schools for Ukrainians is a nationwide helpline leaflet. Other materials related to psychosocial support (e.g., information on coping with stress or invitations to see the school psychologist) were available in schools only in Polish.

The presence of students from Ukraine can be seen in competition results announcements and student council lists, where Ukrainian-sounding names appear.

Leaflets for the Children and Young People's Advocacy Helpline were the most visible material in the schools visited.

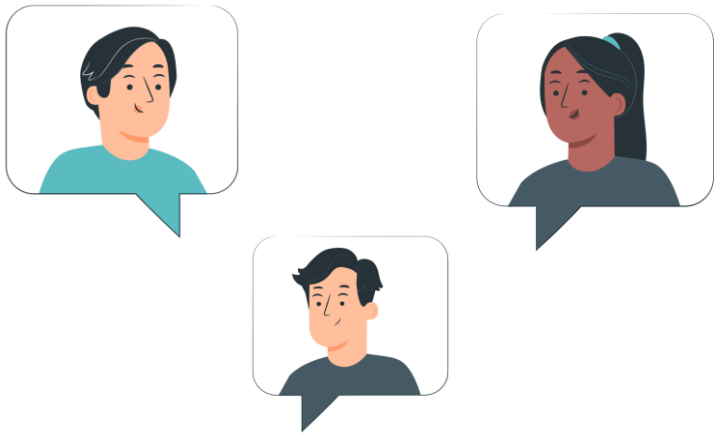
In some of the researched schools there was a clear expectation that students from Ukraine should communicate only in Polish.

The use of Ukrainian or Russian in schools and public spaces often provokes negative reactions from Poles, leading to tensions and conflicts.

Polish teachers and students tend to have an unrealistic expectation that refugee students should switch to fluent Polish in everyday communication, both during the lessons and informal conversations.

In some schools, teachers openly express this expectation.

Uncertainty and lack of understanding about the content of conversations in a foreign language further frustrate Polish interviewees. When these conversations are accompanied by negative behaviour such as name-calling or aggression, some Polish students and teachers feel threatened.



> *But most of all it's probably the kids from the fourth grade. They're the kind of people who run around and are quick to threaten to punch you in the face. They shout in Russian, they push us. Sometimes when I walk down the corridor where we have lessons, I literally* ***feel like I'm not in a Polish school.*** [PS1 FGI PL students]

> *What annoys me? Their behaviour on the school playground. They call each other names, rather unpleasant names. They use their language all the time. In spite of everything. Even when we agreed that here at school we speak Polish to each other. They think we don't understand it. But after such a long time, we already do. [PS4 IDI non-teaching employee].*

> *Even when we're just walking down the corridor during breaks speaking Ukrainian or Russian to each other, the teachers reprimand us, [asking] 'why aren't you speaking Polish?' [VS6 FGI UA students]*

Students from Ukraine are settling into Polish schools.

SETTLING IN

Students who arrived in Poland during the first months or the first year after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine have 'settled' into Polish realities. Compared to last school year, they are more familiar with formal and informal school rules (e.g., they know regulations, rules of behaviour during lessons and breaks, and informal norms of peer interaction). Many students have improved their knowledge of Polish, which enables them to learn more effectively.

SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT

This has translated into a greater sense of security and empowerment for some students, evident in their involvement in student councils, articulating their needs, or intervening with teachers in difficult situations (e.g., peer violence).

RELATIONSHIPS

Some students have also experienced a positive change in their social relationships. They have made friends with their Polish peers.

> *When I came to this school, I only talked to one person, but now I talk to everyone.* [PS2 FGI UA students]

INCREASE IN STUDENT ACTIVITY

Some students have become more active during classes. We have also observed more students from Ukraine than in the last school year getting involved in the activities of student councils (their presence in the councils is becoming more common), organizing events on school grounds, and showing a greater willingness to participate in volunteering. There is also an increase in attendance at extracurricular activities.

Studying at a Polish school has many advantages, but it also involves a lot of stress and difficult emotions.

ADVANTAGES OF A POLISH SCHOOL

Supportive teachers. As in previous years, students from Ukraine appreciate the attitude of many Polish teachers, who provide help both in learning and coping with everyday problems.

Variety of extracurricular activities. Students value the wide range of extracurricular activities, which help them acquire additional skills and develop their interests.

Peer support. There are instances of supportive peer environments – classmates helping others to study and catch up on missed lessons.

DISADVANTAGES OF A POLISH SCHOOL

Overload. Students from Ukraine feel overworked due to the high number of classroom activities (including additional PSL classes - Polish as a Second Language) and the need to put extra effort into learning subjects in a foreign language. We have seen cases of frustration, apathy, and a decrease in motivation to learn.

The discriminatory behaviour of Polish students disturbs the sense of security for their Ukrainian peers, negatively affecting their integration process, learning effectiveness, and general psychological well-being.

> *In Ukraine, [the quality of teaching] was much worse. Teachers didn't care about your grades, about your progress. And **here they do care**. They invite us to extra classes, they explain [things].* [PS6 FGI UA students]

> *There are lots of interesting learning materials. **The teachers really make an effort**.* [GS8 FGI UA students]

> *I have seven or eight lessons a day, sometimes even nine. It's really hard; **I start school at 8 a.m. and finish at 4 p.m.** [PS3 FGI UA students]*

WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

A SENSE OF STABILITY IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

A key factor in refugee students' attitudes towards the Polish school system is a sense of stability, which largely depends on the life plans of their parents. The decision by parents or guardians to build a new life in Poland is usually a watershed moment in their children's education.

Compared to previous years, student turnover in schools has decreased significantly: students move less frequently, and the number of students in classes remains stable.

> *Those who are in class for the second year – last year they didn't really learn. They didn't understand, why they were here, they wanted to go back, they missed [home], they had their remote learning, and that was their focus.* ***And now they've realized that it goes on and on, and they're about to move into a [mixed] class. And this year, two of them are working so hard that they're getting straight A's.*** [PS3 IDI PSL teacher]

> *There's a boy [at the school] who really works hard, because he knows that he's going to stay here [in Poland]. [VS6 IDI teacher]*

> *Will they be here, or will they go to Germany? The uncertainty, the desire to return to their country, made it very difficult for [students from Ukraine] at the beginning to assume their duties, to participate in classes.* ***They were withdrawn, they didn't make any attempts to interact with Polish students. In many cases, this has changed.*** [VS6 IDI school pedagogue]

WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

DEMOTIVATING SENSE OF TEMPORARINESS

According to teachers, many students from Ukraine still feel a sense of temporariness. Uncertain about whether they will stay in Poland, many do not feel it is worth investing their efforts in integration.

This leads to a prolonged state of mental limbo: while Ukrainian families may have lived in Poland for over two years, they constantly hope for an imminent return to Ukraine. Physically, they are 'here,' but mentally and emotionally, they remain 'there.'

The effects of a sense of temporariness

- Slow progress in learning Polish
- Low academic performance
- Withdrawal from school life
- Failure to form deep bonds with peers
- Isolation from the Polish environment
- Reduced mental well-being

Other factors discouraging students

- Language barrier
- Concern for the safety of loved ones in Ukraine
- Unfavourable news about the frontline situation in Ukraine
- Unsuccessful attempts to build relationships with Poles
- Financial difficulties that prevent participation in extracurricular activities (due to both cost and dedicating free time to paid work)
- Exhaustion from looking after younger siblings or taking on casual jobs to provide additional income for the family
- Parallel online education in a Ukrainian school

EXPECTATION OF GRATITUDE

In each conversation we've had with Polish individuals, there is a recurring expectation of gratitude from Ukrainians.

Polish interlocutors emphasize how much Polish society has done for people from Ukraine: welcoming refugees, offering humanitarian aid, and providing financial and military support to Ukraine.

In personal relationships, the dynamic of gift-giving often emerges. While the gift is theoretically selfless, in practice, there is an expectation of reciprocity.

School staff, parents, and Polish students often feel that this expression of gratitude is lacking among students from Ukraine.

On one hand, they observe students from Ukraine leaving Poland and cutting ties, while on the other, they sense a lack of engagement from those who remain. Furthermore, new educational challenges deepen the disappointment and frustration felt by teachers.

> *Sometimes when I have one of them here, **I say, 'See, the school is doing so much for you. Why are you repaying us this way?'** You're causing problems at a time when we are really giving you a lot here to make you feel good and safe.* [GS7 IDI principal]

> *So far, I feel like we are the ones that are giving everything, **we reach out, but there's no feedback** on whether they want to participate in something [or not]. If we come up with something, it's either viewed negatively or met with no involvement.* [GS7 IDI teacher]

> *They used to be able to come and say, you know, things like , 'I'm hungry' or 'I'm cold, can I get a hug?' But not anymore. Now, they walk by us indifferently, there is less contact. They don't need our help anymore, they have everything they need. (...) But **to give back something they once received from us, they can't thank us wholeheartedly**. I really feel bad about it.* [SP4 IDI non-teaching employee].

COMPULSION TO SHOW GRATITUDE

Students from Ukraine perceive the situation differently. The social pressure to express gratitude feels fake to them, and they sometimes question the amount of help they have actually received. Like their Polish peers, they do not feel obligated to be grateful for the opportunity of free education in schools funded by taxes, among other sources. Students from Ukraine emphasize that they haven't received anything for free and that their life in Poland is supported by the money earned by their mothers or guardians.

> *They say, 'We help you so much,' but **I have never received any help**. My mother works, and we pay for everything ourselves. I am **grateful, but without exaggeration.*** [PS1 FGI UA students]

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

One day, Larysa came home from school in tears because her Polish classmates – including former friends – had turned away from her. They accused her and other Ukrainians of exploiting Poland's social assistance, claiming they rented flats for free and received benefits. Polish peers told them to go back to Ukraine.

Larysa's mother, Tatiana, explained to her daughter that these accusations were false. They hadn't received anything 'for free'. She reminded Larysa that she had worked as a nurse before coming to Poland. After arriving in Poland, due to the lack of recognition of her Ukrainian diploma, Tatiana had to enroll in nursing school while working in two community care homes to support herself and her two children.

Tatiana herself has faced similar accusations at work.

In her opinion, Polish students 'bring such opinions from home'.

PREPARATORY AND ‘FOREIGN’ CLASSES

PREPARATORY CLASSES

ASSUMPTIONS

Preparatory classes are special classrooms designed for students arriving from abroad who either do not know Polish or have insufficient knowledge of the language to study in regular classrooms.

Their purpose is to facilitate the integration of these students into the Polish educational system through intensive Polish language lessons and adapted school curricula designed for foreign students.

These classrooms can be established in both primary and secondary schools and are intended to include various foreign students. Their operation is governed by the 2016 Education Law and the 2022 Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens.

IMPLEMENTATION

Teachers in such classrooms often lack the necessary competencies, leading to an excessive workload and, in some cases, professional burnout.

Preparatory classes are often physically separated from the rest of the school, with students not sharing classes with their Polish peers. This isolation makes it difficult for them to be in touch with everyday Polish and integrate effectively.

In some cases, preparatory classes have become a way of ‘storing’ students with low motivation to learn, without providing real support for their continued education.

The evaluation of preparatory classes in the survey schools is mixed, with negative opinions prevailing.

According to principals and teachers, there are several problems arising from unclear regulations and organizational difficulties.

SHORTCOMINGS

Organizational chaos. The organization of preparatory classes was often chaotic and last-minute. This was due to the lack of data on the number of incoming students and their level of proficiency in Polish. These issues hindered effective teaching planning, negatively impacting the quality of education and causing frustration among principals and teachers.

Teachers' workload. Being a class tutor in a preparatory classroom involves considerable effort and stress. For teachers, teaching in these classes often means extra work hours, preparing materials, and the need for additional training. Many teachers experience burnout.

> *Some were reading a myth, and others writing letters. (...) A different thing with everyone. I felt like [I was] in the 1950s, like a teacher on the frontiers, in the countryside,* ***one person doing everything****.* [PS IDI PSL teacher].

Redirection of 'problematic' students. Some principals express disappointment, indicating that preparatory classes were used by schools as a way to 'offload' low-motivated students with behavioural problems.

Isolation of students, exacerbation of separation tendencies, lack of contact with everyday Polish.

STORAGE ROOMS

Principals and teachers question the effectiveness of preparatory classes in preparing children for further education in the Polish system. The data collected suggests that these classes often function as 'storage rooms' for students with low motivation to learn, serving more as a day care centre while parents are at work, than as a place for effective educational integration.

> *Are these supposed to be classrooms preparing children to function in the Polish education system, or are they supposed to be storage rooms for children from migrant families? Most often, it's the latter case. (...) We were teaching them Polish, and a moment later they would either return [to their home country] or move on, and all this learning was completely pointless.*
> [GS7 IDI principal]

There is a sense that the preparatory classes format has reached its limits.

LACK OF DEMAND

Principals and teachers from schools that have established preparatory classes agree that there is currently little demand for such solutions.

The number of students requiring this type of preparation is small, and according to teachers, new students can be effectively integrated into mixed classrooms, which benefits the overall integration process.

THERE ARE ALSO ADVANTAGES

Preparatory classes are seen as an effective solution in situations where large numbers of students with limited Polish language skills need to be admitted, making integration into mixed classrooms difficult for logistical reasons (e.g., lack of available places).

The value of preparatory classes lies primarily in providing a safe educational environment. This view is shared by various interviewees: principals, teachers, as well as parents and students (the latter also emphasize the sense of security these classrooms provide).

> *We were considering whether to create new preparatory classes, but the principals said the children were coping [in mixed classrooms], so* ***we decided to try without creating them.*** [PS1 IDI governing body]
>
> *There would need to be another big wave of genuine refugees; otherwise, there is no need. We are in a different place. Now we need to take care of those who have fallen out of the system and those who want to go to university.* [GS7 IDI principal]

PREPARATORY CLASSES.
CASE OF CHILDREN IN UKRAINIAN FOSTER CARE.

Among the refugees who arrived in Poland **many children came from Ukrainian orphanages**. One of the more notable cases involved the evacuation of over 1,600 children from institutions in Kharkiv and Odessa. During the year and a half they spent in Poland, these children continued their education remotely through the Ukrainian system. In November 2023, some were enrolled in a preparatory year (PY) at one of the surveyed schools.

These children, often without medical records, had **undiagnosed educational needs and disabilities**, posing an additional challenge for teachers.

The preparatory unit they were placed in **consisted entirely of students from Ukraine**, with few opportunities for a meaningful contact with children from other classes during breaks, and no participation in school extracurricular activities.

After school, they returned to the centre where they lived. Following homework, their free time was spent on activities such as playing games or using the local sports pitch. Although football could serve as a universal language of integration, it did not always fulfil this role, as the students themselves confirmed:

> *There are those who accost Ukrainians terribly, they don't respect us at all. If they don't let us play on the pitch or throw us out, we just leave, not to create problems. But there are also those who are nice, and we can play together.*
> [SP FGI UA students]

As a result, despite spending more than two years in Poland, these children, with their limited knowledge of Polish, continue to function in an isolated environment, struggling to integrate with their school peers.

The story of this group highlights the challenges of integrating children from foster care and illustrates the limitations of preparatory classes.

Rather than fostering integration, preparatory classes can sometimes lead to further isolation for students, particularly those facing difficult life circumstances.

unicef
for every child

‘Foreign’ classes are a concept no one wants to repeat.

Two schools participating in the study established ‘foreign’ classrooms for non-Polish students (mainly from Ukraine but not only) which implemented the Polish curriculum for their respective levels of education. This experience was assessed negatively in both institutions.

These ‘foreign’ classes were reputed to be ‘difficult’: many students had behavioural problems and demonstrated low motivation to learn. Teachers were reluctant to work there, and the language barrier further hindered communication with both Polish students and teachers.

The very strong term ‘ghettos’, used last school year to describe the isolation of students in ‘foreign’ classrooms, was also repeated in this edition of the study.

> *This class will somehow make it to the final exams.* ***If I don't lose my cool before that****, and if I don’t turn into a father who finally runs out of patience, bangs on the table and says, 'Enough! Get to work, you little brats!'* [IDI principal]

> *This eighth-grade Ukrainian class...* ***Luckily, they’re about to graduate*** *from our school.* [IDI Teacher]

LEARNING NEEDS
Polish as a Second Language

Teachers believe that most students from Ukraine know enough Polish to effectively participate in classes.

The reality is more varied.

DECLARATIONS VS REALITY

In the previous school year (2023/24), teachers noted that students from Ukraine had to improve their Polish. This year, the general view is that students from Ukraine already know the language.

According to our observations, while some students manage well in Polish, understand the lessons, and achieve good results, there is still a group that struggles with communication in Polish, making it difficult for them to study effectively.

PROGRESS IS MUCH SLOWER IN PREPARATORY CLASSES

Attending mixed classrooms is crucial for learning Polish, as it ensures constant exposure to the language.

Students in preparatory and 'foreign' classrooms rated their Polish language skills lower than their peers in mixed classrooms, citing difficulties in reading and comprehension of written texts. While some mastered the alphabet, many continued to confuse basic verb forms.

> *[in the PY] they learned Polish much slower than in mixed classrooms; in fact,* ***they hardly learned anything at all*** *(...) most continued their remote Ukrainian [schooling] and were here 'just in case'.* [PS IDI PSL teacher]

INCONSISTENT TEACHER DECLARATIONS

Teachers express concerns over low attendance in Polish as a Second Language (PSL) classes, emphasizing their importance. On the other hand, they claim that students are comfortable participating in subject lessons without the need for language adjustments.

One can assume that teachers may avoid acknowledging that some students have language difficulties so they don't have to provide additional support and adjustments, which poses organizational and pedagogical challenges. This underestimation negatively impacts teaching effectiveness.

> *Knowledge of the language has improved, so it is easier to teach, and I generally* ***don't see any major differences [between students from Poland and Ukraine].*** [PS4 IDI biology teacher]

LANGUAGE CHALLENGES

LANGUAGE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

Some teachers still observe that students from Ukraine struggle with using Polish in the learning process. They find it difficult to understand instructions or participate in exercises that require knowledge of complex or abstract vocabulary. At the same time, the specific language of education is rarely taught in schools, with the exception of some individual teachers doing it.

SPECIALIST VOCATIONAL LANGUAGE

Teachers note that studying in vocational and technical schools is particularly challenging for students due to the specialized, technical vocabulary. Some students consider these language difficulties when choosing their future school, though they are not always able to assess the complexity of the jargon accurately.

WRITING

Many students from Ukraine struggle with writing in Polish and consciously avoid situations where they need to write.

> *[Students from Ukraine] have highly developed mathematical skills, but **the main problem is with language**, particularly understanding concepts and terminology.*
> [GS8 IDI physics teacher]

> *This is the first time they've chosen the logistics profession in my class. (...) These technical terms are difficult for them. There isn't a lot of it in the first year, but **it's hard to explain [things]**. The language barrier is there, but they're motivated, so we're managing somehow.*
> [GS7 IDI logistics teacher]

Polish as a Second Language (PSL) lessons do not meet the expectations of either students or teachers.

Surveyed schools reported low attendance at PSL classes, and teachers expressed difficulties in motivating students to participate.

Both principals and teachers believe that 6 additional hours of PSL per week is too much. In their opinion, by now, most students from Ukraine speak Polish well, and with an already overloaded schedule, these classes become an additional burden.

Principals and teachers generally feel that allocating additional funds (from the budget or local government) for language classes for children from Ukraine is unjustified and comes at the expense of Polish students, which they consider unfair, limiting the resources that could be allocated to Polish students.

Interestingly, some students from Ukraine were not even aware that PSL classes were available at their school.

> *These funds for Polish language learning for children from Ukraine — we're not able to fully utilize them. [PS4 IDI deputy principal]*

BARRIERS TO USING POLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS

Due to organizational challenges, the groups often consist of students of different ages and/or varying levels of language proficiency. Children who arrived in Poland two years ago are taught alongside new students, which negatively affects teaching effectiveness. As a result, students find the classes useless and stop attending them.

UNENGAGING CLASSES

We observed both engaging lessons focused on speaking and repetitive grammar exercises from textbooks, with limited opportunities for casual conversations.

Students frequently mentioned the low attractiveness of these classes, which they found boring due to tedious, repetitive grammar drills or tasks that were too easy.

CLASSES FOR THE WEAKEST STUDENTS

In schools, these classes are generally viewed as being designed for students with very limited Polish language skills, rather than for those who want to further improve them. This impacts both the structure of the lessons and the willingness of students with a basic knowledge of Polish to attend – they often feel the classes are too basic.

REMEDIAL CLASSES IN POLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

In many cases, the classes resemble standard Polish lessons, focusing on the core curriculum (e.g., discussing compulsory reading or preparing for tests).

COMPETITION WITH EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

These classes often clash with students' other activities, including leisure time and responsibilities at home, such as caring for siblings.

OVERLOAD

The lessons are crammed into already full schedules, meaning students either have to start their day very early or return home late. The high number of lessons makes it difficult for them to stay focused and engaged.

> *We have extra Polish lessons that we don't need. You can quote me on that. (...) There are too many of them, and they are useless.* ***I could spend this time doing something more useful****, like preparing for tests.*
> [GS8 FGI UA students]

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

FROM MORNING TO NIGHT

At one primary school, students attending extra Polish classes in the afternoon had to either wait at school for the lessons to begin or return to school after a few hours.

The school has a large number of students, which means that classes are held until late in the evening.

This situation led to protests from parents, resulting in a meeting with the teacher. While parents eventually accepted the late hours, they insisted that their children would not attend all the scheduled classes.

ONE LESSON, DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

At another primary school, Polish as a Second Language lessons are scheduled at either 7:10 a.m. or after 4 p.m. (tenth hour of the school day).

In one group, there are both students preparing for the eighth-grade exam and a student who arrived in Poland just two months ago.

LACK OF DIVERSIFIED DIDACTIC FORMS

During an observation of a Polish as a Second Language lesson in a preparatory year at a primary school, students spent 45 minutes taking turns at the blackboard, doing verb conjugation exercises.

TEACHERS ARE STILL UNDERPREPARED TO TEACH POLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (PSL)

The level of teachers' preparedness for teaching Polish as a Second Language varies. In the surveyed schools, only a few teachers have completed glottodidactics courses or postgraduate studies; most PSL classes are taught by regular Polish language and literature teachers. The potential of foreign language teachers remains largely untapped.

Low student attendance and a sense of temporariness concerning these classes discourage teachers from investing in further training, which requires both time and financial commitment.

> *These are regular Polish language and literature teachers [teaching PSL]. There was no training in that respect.* [GS8 IDI principal]

Teachers often rely on intuition when planning and conducting classes. Only some of them have attended meetings, webinars, or short training sessions on working with foreign students.

The teachers' self-assessment of their preparation to teach PSL varies. Awareness of the need for specialized training is growing, although progress is slow in that respect.

STUDENTS VALUE PRACTICAL POLISH CLASSES

LESSONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Students appreciate classes focused on conversations and learning everyday language, where topics relevant to their lives are discussed.

Polish as a Second Language classes provide students from Ukraine with an opportunity to engage with Polish customs and everyday life (for some, one of the few opportunities to do so.) These classes also serve as a space for them to share their experiences and interests.

PSL LESSONS – GOOD PRACTICE

In a primary school in a smaller town, students are very satisfied with their Polish as a Second Language lessons because there is plenty of space for conversation, and they can contribute to the class format – the teacher asks what topics they would like to cover.

> ***We talk a lot.*** *The teacher introduces a topic – sport, culture.* ***She asks us what we like.*** [PS FGI UA students]
>
> *We had activities outside of the classroom four times. We could talk. Apart from that,* ***we don't have to sit****; we can stand, walk, sit on a bench.* [PS FGI UA students]
>
> ***[The course] at the school is absolutely wonderful****. I thank God for our teacher. She doesn't teach standard lessons where you just sit and learn; she does everything through conversation. She takes them out for ice cream and asks them to order it themselves, or they go to the park or the cinema.* ***They learn everyday language, not just memorize phrases by heart****. This motivates them to learn.* [PS IDI parent_1]

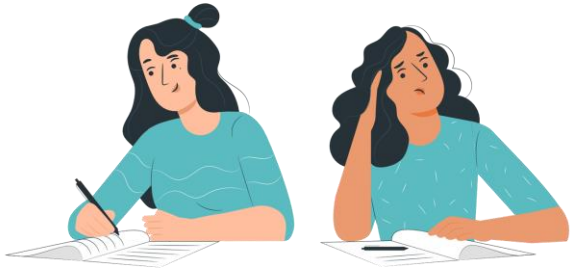
LEARNING NEEDS
Examinations
and the choice of secondary school

Examinations

Just like last year, teachers emphasize that **success in the eighth-grade exam is closely tied to the level of proficiency in Polish.**

The exam seems to present a significant obstacle to students' educational goals. Low self-esteem causes students from Ukraine to choose less ambitious educational paths.

Language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the Polish context lead to lower exam results, which in turn decreases the students' engagement in learning.



> *But those children who cared most [about passing the exam] and often talked about [moving on to] general secondary schools were the [ones] who communicated in Polish, attended extra Polish language classes in Ukraine, or had [Polish] roots. [PS2 IDI principal]*

POSITIVELY EVALUATED

Extended time to complete tasks (210 minutes)

The possibility of using dictionaries, which aids the understanding of texts and instructions

NEGATIVELY EVALUATED

Exam topics were abstract and difficult to understand (e.g., a long passage about patriotism from *Stones for the Rampart*, a novel about acts of sabotage by the Polish scout movement during World War II).

The performance of students from Ukraine is not considered in the school's classification. This is viewed negatively in schools where Ukrainian eighth-graders achieve high academic results.

EXAM CONTROVERSIES

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

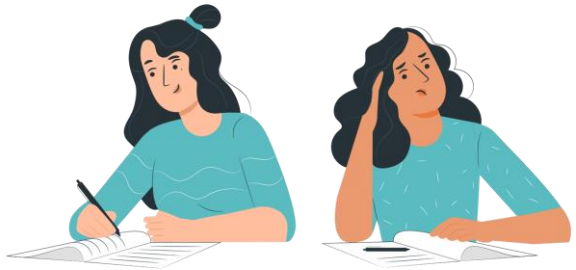
Students from Ukraine rarely choose Russian for the eighth-grade exam (in 2024, 26% of students chose Russian compared to 72% who chose English*). Choosing Russian could improve their chances of scoring higher and gaining admission to a good secondary school, while opting for English often results in lower exam scores.

This issue stems from the formal requirements that were in place until the end of the 2023/24 school year (the language chosen for the exam had to be taught at the school). As the study shows, peer pressure and students' lack of awareness of these requirements also contribute to the problem. Many students feel uncomfortable choosing the language of the aggressor and fear that this decision might not be socially acceptable.

> *They are not consistent, because when they came to us, they did not want to hear about Russia at all. And then the child chooses Russian for the exam.* ***To me, this is completely inconsistent. They are not entirely honest with us.*** *[PS IDI school volunteering supervisor]*

PRIVILEGED UKRAINIANS, DISADVANTAGED BELARUSIANS

The surveyed schools were also attended by Belarusian students. Teachers noted their unequal situation. While the same exam rules apply to both Belarusian and Polish students, Belarusians only have access to 2 hours of Polish as a Second Language, compared to the 6 hours available to students from Ukraine (reduced to 4 hours starting from 2024/25 school year).



STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

THE STORY OF HANIA FROM BELARUS

Hania's story highlights the importance of providing parents and students with clear information during their integration into the Polish education system. Hania joined Grade 8 and initially wanted to take Russian in the final exam, a decision approved by the school administration. However, halfway through the year, it turned out that she could only take a language taught at the school, forcing her to choose English, which she knew poorly. She feels cheated and hurt, and the whole situation caused her considerable stress.

https://cke.gov.pl/images/_EGZAMIN_OSMOKLASISTY/Informacje_o_wynikach/2024/20240703_Wstepna_informacja_o_wynikach_E8_2024_PREZENTACJA.pdf [retrieved: 21 july 2024].

EDUCATIONAL PLANS OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

More and more families from Ukraine are coming to terms with the fact that they will not be returning to their home country anytime soon, and are therefore starting to plan their futures in Poland.

> ***The future is brighter here**. Because Poland is in the EU. [There is] a chance for a good job, because the pay is better.* [PS5 FGI UA U]

> ***I'm not going back** to Ukraine, case closed.* [PS3 TRI UA students]

Some families are thinking of moving to larger cities in Poland or migrating to Western Europe, which influences their children's educational choices.

> ***I don't even know if I'm going to live in this city**. So, for now, there's no point in choosing anything.* [PS3 TRI UA students]

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

The eighth-grade class tutor, who is also a Polish language teacher, observes that most students from Ukraine now associate their future with Poland.

The teacher used various methods to explore their plans for further education. She now notes that the hope of returning to Ukraine is becoming less common. The students have 'become used to the situation'.

> *They have already adapted to the point where they are starting to plan their future here. They ask how long the technical school lasts, what kind of education you get after completing technical school, and where they can go to study in Poland.* [PS5 IDI teacher]

CHOOSING A SCHOOL: UNCERTAINTY AND STRESS

Many Ukrainian primary school students find it difficult to choose a secondary school due to their limited knowledge of the Polish education system and various types of schools.

Students considering technical or vocational schools **worry about whether they will be able to handle the specialist vocabulary.** They do not have the opportunity to test their skills in this area beforehand.

The **low self-esteem and lack of confidence** of some students from Ukraine lead to less ambitious educational choices, limiting their future opportunities ('I am unfit for a general secondary school').

The need to **integrate into a new environment, enter the Polish educational system, and adjust their goals** creates additional stress.

> *We don't have plans. I'm thinking about a technical school, but I haven't decided on a specialization. I'm looking at technical schools, general secondary schools.* ***I'll go where I go****. There are so many options that I don't know what to choose – everything is interesting.* [PS4 DI UA U]

> *(…) They lack an understanding of why they should study here [in Poland] 'Why should I go to a better school or university if it takes 5 years to complete, and I won't be here that long?' It's difficult for them to see any prospects for the future.* [PS6 IDI psychologist]

CAUTIOUS ADVICE FROM TEACHERS

During the study, it was observed that some teachers tried to assist students with their decision on educational path. Some were cautious about students' plans, such as university studies, and emphasized the need to improve their Polish language skills or gain additional knowledge. These teachers often advised students to revise their plans and opt for an 'easier' path.

During the study, it was difficult to assess the accuracy of these diagnoses and whether the guidance provided was appropriate for the students' abilities.

UNREALISTIC STUDENT PLANS

At the same time, when asked about their long-term plans, some students spoke of paths that would become unrealistic once their short-term plans were completed.. For example, one student planned to attend a vocational school, but when asked what's next, he expressed an interest in studying medicine. This highlights the need to provide more information about the structure of the Polish education system.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL: DIFFERENT PATHWAYS OF ACTION

PATHWAY 1. FAST-TRACK TO WORK

Some students aim to finish secondary school as fast as possible to enter the labour market. Possible reasons include economic pressures (such as the need to support their family), low cultural capital, or plans to leave Poland soon.

Teachers who try to encourage these students to continue their education often feel powerless, though some have had success.

> *[The student] started working and (…) I finally convinced him. I said, 'You've got very good grades' – because he's one of our most talented lads – and you want to go and work in an orchard, what are you doing (…), there's not a lot of school left, finish this second grade. 'You're right', he said.*
> [GS7 IDI teacher]

There are perceptible gender differences:

Boys are more likely than girls to choose the fast track to the labour market, seeking to earn money to support their families.

Girls tend to choose technical schools, and boys vocational schools (car mechanic, warehouseman).

> *The boys are like: finish school fast, start earning money fast. That's boys' thinking. The girls are different; they want an education that won't leave them physically tired."* [PS5 IDI teacher / class tutor of UA students]

PATHWAY 2: ACQUIRE A SPECIFIC PROFESSION

In this pathway, students usually opt for technical or vocational schools, aiming to acquire a profession faster (e.g., IT) than they would by attending a general secondary school followed by university. This route is seen as a way to secure future employment and earn a salary that supports them and their families.

In interviews, students mentioned **architecture and interior design** as interesting fields of study (both at secondary school and university level). One motivation was their desire to return to Ukraine, where there will be a demand for these professions after the end of the war.

PATHWAY 3: GET AN EDUCATION, GO TO UNIVERSITY

Students planning to attend high school and then university appeared to be in the minority. They were more common in larger cities or families with higher cultural capital.

> *In general, students from Ukraine are choosing this vocational pathway. I have not encountered any student choosing a high school.* [PS teacher]

SCHOOLS SUPPORT STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE IN CHOOSING THEIR EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

Students from Ukraine benefit from career counselling in schools, though these classes may not be sufficient for everyone.

Students from Ukraine often require **more information about the Polish education system** than their Polish peers.

Those with poorer knowledge of the Polish language **need more time** to grasp certain issues, so the pace of these sessions should be adjusted to their abilities.

Support with **submitting documents and navigating the IT system to find schools** is also crucial for students from Ukraine and their parents. In most of the surveyed schools, this was a key focus of additional assistance provided to students from Ukraine.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

INFORMATION MEETINGS FOR PARENTS

One Grade 8 tutor, who is also the school's pedagogue, organized a meeting with the parents of students from Ukraine to explain the rules of the eighth-grade exam and secondary school recruitment. This initiative was appreciated by the parents, though they expressed a desire for more help, particularly with filling out the recruitment forms. However, this additional support was not approved by the school management.

ADDITIONAL MEETINGS FOR STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

After organizing presentations on local secondary schools, the school authorities noted the need for extra professional counselling classes specifically for Ukrainian and Belarusian students.

To explain to them individually what schools are available, what professions, what they can and cannot do, and what their aptitudes are. So that they are a little better informed now. [PS IDI principal]

MEETINGS FOR STUDENTS

One secondary school held an information session for both parents and students, where they provided an overview of further education opportunities in Poland and available support institutions. A member of the secretarial staff also met with students to introduce them to online career aptitude tests.

LEARNING NEEDS
Opinions on compulsory education

At the end of the 2023/24 school year, there was a widespread belief among the surveyed schools that students from Ukraine in Poland should be subject to compulsory education.

The level of awareness regarding the new regulations varied among principals, teachers, and parents.

However, compulsory education itself was generally assessed positively. Interlocutors mentioned the negative effects of children and young people remaining outside the education system, such as marginalization and future difficulties in finding employment. There is a belief that school provides an opportunity to learn about Polish culture and integrate into the Polish society.

Polish interviewees also perceived compulsory education from the standpoint of social justice. Since people from Ukraine receive social benefits — Poles argue — they should fulfill the related responsibilities, including sending their children to school.

Teachers and parents considered the new regulations as a way to clarify the legal situation.

> *They should [be subject to compulsory education], of course, because it's also a question of* ***them finding their way in this society.*** [PS6 IDI teacher]

> *This is* ***essential****. We have to somehow encourage integration into the Polish community. If the parents and the student plan to stay here for a longer time, it will only benefit them, (...) and of course, above all, [crucial is] the young person's development.* [GS7 IDI teacher]

> ***If they receive the 800+*** *[benefit], then they should be required to go to school.* [PS4 IDI PL parent]

> *I am extremely happy that 800+ has now been combined with the obligation to enter the Polish education system, When I visited places of collective accommodation,* ***I came across a total fiction:*** *children that didn't go to school pretending to learn at a Ukrainian school.* [PS IDI broader environment, social worker]

> *It is very good [that there will be compulsory education].* ***(...) they cannot adapt if they don't go to school****, if they don't interact with teachers, with children from Polish families.* [PS IDI UA parent]

CONSEQUENCES OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION FOR SCHOOLS

DISTANT THEME

Interviewees in schools are divided in their opinions on the implications of the newly introduced solution for schools. **However, it is not a topic that particularly preoccupies them.**

The lack of accurate data on the expected number of children joining the system, coupled with the absence of information from the Ministry of National Education to prepare schools for this situation, meaning that principals and teachers do not have a fully informed opinion.

Many believe the issue will not affect their schools.

THERE ARE ALSO CONCERNS...

Some teachers, however, fear the negative consequences of accepting new students with limited knowledge of Polish, without proper assessment or information about their previous education in Poland. They are concerned about the potential impact on class integration, particularly in upper grades.

For some teachers, integrating students into secondary schools poses a unique challenge. In their view, students who have been outside the education system for two years will face significant adaptation and educational difficulties, which may negatively affect the learning environment for current students.

...AND HOPES OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

Ukrainian students view the addition of new students from Ukraine positively, seeing it as an opportunity to build new relationships. This is especially important given the existing challenges in integrating students from Poland and Ukraine in schools.

> ***Will they be joining primary schools?*** *I think the problem arises more at the secondary school level. From what I've heard (...) those who should be going to secondary school are not appearing in the system.* [PS4 IDI principal]
>
> ***It's probably going to be more of an issue in primary school.*** *I don't think we have that many [students from Ukraine] in our school.* [GS8 IDI teacher]
>
> ***I don't know what's going to happen.*** *(...) If they come, they come, and we'll accept them. If there's a quantitative issue, we'll report it to the governing body, and they will need to come up with a solution. (...) It can't be that half the town goes to one school and nobody goes to the other.* [PS IDI principal]
>
> ***This will once again turn our lives upside down.*** *Whether it will be for better or worse, I can't say, because every new person brings something new.* [PS4 IDI teacher]

The problem is this huge group of teenagers who didn't attend school when they first arrived in Poland. (...) Now they are seventeen, they know some spoken Polish, but where are they supposed to go? To the fourth grade, a year before the final exams? They have everything but motivation. [GS8 IDI principal]

CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

unicef
for every child

EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Different perspectives on the emotions of children with war trauma

As in the previous year, over time, students from Ukraine are feeling more confident in Polish schools. School provides them with stability and a sense of security.

However, some students are still struggling with trauma and longing for Ukraine and their homes. While teachers try to support them, not all have the competences and capacity to effectively identify problems and provide adequate assistance.

The level of awareness among teachers regarding the traumas that can result from refugee and migration experiences varies significantly.

THE SITUATION IS SERIOUS

Some teachers emphasize that the very fact of being forced to leave Ukraine and abandon their previous lives can be traumatizing for children. They stress that children are aware of the ongoing situation in Ukraine, which can increase their anxiety

> *I believe that **it is not yet possible to talk about the normalization** of the situation. I think it is still the same burning issue. (...) Just because a child sits at their desk, comes to school, and smiles at us sometimes, it doesn't mean they aren't experiencing internal trauma.* [PS2 IDI vice-principal]

'THEY HAVE NOT SEEN THE WAR'

Others believe that only a direct experience of warfare can cause trauma and PTSD.

> *Most of the children who left Ukraine did so in the first weeks of the war, so they didn't really witness it firsthand. (...) PTSD can lead to depression and other serious consequences, **and we haven't observed anything like that in any of the children**.* [VS6 IDI psychologist]

'CHILDREN ARE NOT THAT AFFECTED'

Some downplay the overall impact of the war on children's emotions.

> ***Children don't perceive war the way adults do**. My mother says that as a child, she didn't feel fear. (...) [At our school] a boy came and said they've bombed his village, but he wasn't sad; it was just something new to him.* [PS4 teacher]

APPARENT ‘NORMALITY’

UNCERTAINTY

Teachers note that refugee students often give the impression that ‘everything is fine’. They smile, communicate well with their peers, and, at first glance, appear similar to Polish students. However, even a minor trigger can reveal the trauma they have experienced.

This creates ongoing tension among teachers, who worry that they may suddenly face a situation they do not know how to handle.

THE SCHOOL SHOULD BE READY

Some principals and teachers understand that they need to be prepared for unexpected crises, such as news of a loved one lost to the war. In such cases, the school plays an essential role in providing psychological support.

PARENTS ARE NOT ALWAYS SUPPORTIVE

Principals and teachers indicate that parents are not always able to adequately care for the psychological well-being of their children.

In such situations schools often bear the responsibility to provide the psychological first aid.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

GRANDMOTHER’S DAY

During the school's Grandmother's Day celebrations, a teacher became aware for the first time of the emotions students from Ukraine were experiencing: they not only miss their grandmothers in Ukraine, but also their homes and pets left behind.

> *(…) they are just often homesick. For Ukraine, for the life they had there, for the family that stayed behind – their father or grandmother. They talk about their stress, their worries, and how they don't know what it's like there now. They say they are better off living here, but even so, this stress stays with them.* [SP4 IDI special educator]

SPRING

The children were asked to draw pictures on a spring-related theme. Mykola, who had arrived from Ukraine three months earlier, drew a meadow, butterflies, and colourful flowers... alongside a shooting tank. Next to the tank there was a soldier, surrounded by red spots.

TEACHERS OPENLY TALK ABOUT THEIR HELPLESSNESS

Teachers often do not feel equipped to help students experiencing difficult emotions and are afraid to offer support.

They frequently do not know how to react when children show signs of trauma. They feel confused, which may result in avoiding topics related to the war or refugee experiences, as these subjects seem too sensitive to them.

The lack of appropriate skills causes some teachers to overlook the emotional state of their students. Just because a child doesn't appear sad or show obvious signs of trauma does not mean they aren't struggling with difficult experiences.

Additionally, teachers often fail to connect educational challenges with the possible traumas refugee students may have endured.

A POLISH LESSON AND DREAMS

During a Polish language lesson in a mixed classroom, students read a textbook passage about a fisherman and a goldfish. The teacher asks the students about their dreams. Among various answers – such as wishing for a new house or a nice car – Sasha, a student from Ukraine, says, 'I would like to see my mother.'

The teacher responds by asking Sasha to speak in a complete sentence, without acknowledging the content of what he said.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS REQUIRING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

During the course of the study, researchers gathered numerous stories of refugee students in need of psychosocial support, highlighting the extent of the need and the challenges in providing effective assistance.

These cases involve both children who arrived within the last year and those who arrived earlier, whose problems only became evident over time.

Some of these students had experienced trauma or saw it worsen while already living in Poland

MASHA WILL REPEAT GRADE THREE

Masha from Kharkiv came to Poland with one bag. She speaks very little and struggled to integrate into her class. She was frequently late and often absent, prompting intervention from school authorities. Due to her academic backlog, Masha will repeat grade three of primary school.

SHE JUST SPAT IT OUT

A conflict with a classmate triggered a strong emotional reaction in a Ukrainian eighth-grader. She went to the school counsellor and confessed that she had experienced trauma while already living in Poland.

She started talking (…) she had been in other schools and had gone through such traumatic situations there (…) I was the first person she told about it (…) she thought she could handle it on her own. These kids really went through a lot (…) they were received differently in Poland. They were isolated, excluded, ridiculed. [PS IDI pedagogue]

MAXIM'S FATHER IS FIGHTING ON THE FRONTLINE

Maxim has difficulties interacting with his peers and frequently gets into fights with Polish boys. His father is currently fighting on the front lines, and Maxim misses him very much.

When you talk to him, he's sweet and promises to improve, but then he continues doing what he does. [PS IDI pedagogue]

THIN BONES

A boy from Kharkiv, who had attended a ballet school, fled to Poland with his mother and younger brother at the beginning of the full-scale war. At his Polish school, he was bullied by peers and had to seek support from the school psychologist. In March, during a PE lesson, he broke his leg. The surgeon suspected that the brittleness of his bones might have been caused by prolonged stress.

WHAT HELPS TO PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS

‘ONE OF YOUR OWN’

Ukrainian school staff, including non-teaching employees, play an important role. These individuals often take on an informal supportive role, positively impacting the emotional security of students from Ukraine.

A FRIENDLY ADULT

Adults who build relationships based on trust act as informal mentors to whom students can turn in difficult situations. They not only assist with academic matters but also become advocates for students within the school, for example during educational councils.

Children and young people from Ukraine trust teachers who build relationships on an informal level, not just focusing on learning; they talk about their interests and experiences.

UKRAINIAN PEER TUTORING

Older students from Ukraine who have already navigated the Polish education system naturally become guides and mentors for newly arrived students. Peer support fosters quicker integration and helps create a sense of community.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

In one school, an important informal community role is played by a janitor. Students from Ukraine from different classes gather in her room during breaks, where they drink tea together and can freely speak Ukrainian or Russian. The janitor has created a safe space for students from Ukraine and has become their confidante.

In every school studied over the past three years, there is at least one Polish teacher whom students from Ukraine like and trust.

I go to the psychologist basically every day, just to talk about football, my day, or my grades. [PS2 FGI UA student]

In one school, students from Ukraine help their newly arrived classmates. They show them around, explain the rules, and support them if they have any problems.

We always appoint someone in the class who has been studying in Poland for a while and knows how to help new classmates. [PS5 IDI school psychologist]

WHAT HELPS TO PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS

A SAFE PLACE

It is important to ensure that students from Ukraine have spaces at school where they feel welcome. These spaces become a refuge where they can take a break from the hustle and bustle of school life, fostering their sense of security.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

In many schools, libraries are becoming places where students from Ukraine can spend their breaks in a quiet atmosphere, away from the noise. Although they rarely borrow books, they value the intimate space where they can relax. Teachers have noted that students enjoy using such spaces, seeing them as neutral, and that librarians become trusted figures they can interact with.

CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Students, especially those struggling to adapt, tend to open up better in individual conversations outside of the classroom. Creating spaces for such meetings fosters confidence and trust.

During career counselling with 7th and 8th graders, the teacher gave students from Ukraine the opportunity to present themselves individually.

Last year, the [children] from Ukraine didn't want to present in front of the class, so during break time, I asked them to tell me about themselves in private. This year, one boy from seventh grade presented himself to the class and received huge applause for his courage. [PS IDI principal]

NGO SUPPORT

Schools benefit from the support of various NGOs offering psychological assistance to children in Russian and Ukrainian. Mental health initiatives addressed to all students are considered useful, as they provide access to external experts and ready-made materials to support the educational and psychological development of students.

Some of the surveyed schools receive support from mobile psychologists provided by an NGOs. A team of Ukrainian psychotherapists is available to travel wherever their services are needed. Schools and kindergartens can request their assistance, allowing the psychotherapists to come directly to these institutions and, in collaboration with school staff, offer support to children and young people in need. The team assists dozens of schools across Warsaw and the Masovian region.

WHAT HINDERS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

INSUFFICIENT COMPETENCES OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are able to help students with emotional issues but are often unprepared to work with war-related trauma.

They tend to treat students from Ukraine the same way as their Polish peers (e.g., as growing up adolescents), which means they do not fully consider the experience of being a war refugee.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

There is low or no availability of specialists who can work in Ukrainian or Russian.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE AVAILABLE POSSIBILITIES

Pedagogues, school psychologists, and teachers are not always aware of the availability of specialist support in Ukrainian or Russian. As a result, they do not know where to direct their students.

TEACHERS ARE NOT PREPARED TO PROVIDE PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

Teachers often do not view the psychosocial support of students as part of their responsibilities and tend to delegate these tasks to pedagogues or school psychologists. Instead, they focus primarily on teaching their subjects.

Although class tutors have the closest contact with students, they do not always have an in-depth understanding of their students' emotional situations. They also rarely have the time and space to address students' emotional states in detail. The large number of children and young people with special needs makes it even more challenging.

WHAT HINDERS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

THE PROBLEM OF DIAGNOSING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Teachers and educators report that many students from Ukraine arrived in Poland **without a psychological diagnosis regarding their learning abilities and social interactions.**

Many psychological and educational counselling centres lack specialists who speak Ukrainian or Russian. In one of the large cities where we conducted research, there was no specialist available who spoke either language in any of the counselling centres(!). This makes it impossible to properly diagnose students and assess their educational needs.

As a result, teachers working with refugee children face serious challenges. They observe that these children have special educational needs but do not know how to provide appropriate support.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

MISHA HASN'T WRITTEN A SINGLE TEST IN CLASS

A child from Ukrainian foster care has a speech impediment and likely an intellectual disability. Both his guardian and his teachers are trying to obtain a diagnosis for him from the psychological and educational counselling centre, but there is no specialist available.

I have a student in dire need of being examined. Even the foster carer doesn't understand what Misha is saying, and I don't understand him either. He hasn't written a single test in class; he doesn't write at all. (...) It all comes down to the fact that there's no one who speaks the language [in the counselling centre]. Nobody understands him. (...) Here [in Poland], we can't promote someone like Misha [to the next grade] if he hasn't written a single line in his class tests. He lives in his own world. [PS IDI PSL teacher]

"THE SYSTEM IS MERCILESS"

A Polish language teacher works one-on-one with a Ukrainian student. She is required to cover excerpts from *Pan Tadeusz* and *Quo Vadis* (from the compulsory reading list), even though the student struggles to read and comprehend basic concepts in Polish. The student has not been diagnosed, which prevents adjusting the curriculum to his abilities.

WHAT HINDERS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

STUDENTS' DISTRUST OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Some students from Ukraine do not trust school psychologists, viewing them as individuals who would use information for the school's benefit rather than the students' welfare.

I never trusted psychologists. They say they won't tell anyone, but then they reveal your secrets, and the teachers find out too. [PS5 IDI UA student1]

PARENTS' RELUCTANCE TO COOPERATE WITH A PSYCHOLOGIST

In many Ukrainian families, negative stereotypes about psychological support persist. Parents often fear that institutions might interfere in their private lives. Some also hold misconceptions, such as believing that referring a child to a psychological and educational counselling centre could lead to the child being taken away by the state.

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Students from Ukraine highlight the social consequences of seeking assistance from a school psychologist. Some are reluctant to ask for help due to the fear of being ridiculed by their peers.

Researcher: When there is a conflict at school, can you see a psychologist about it?

Student: Yes, but it doesn't make sense. If you go to a psychologist, everyone at school will know about it and condemn you even more.

[PS5 FGI UA students]

SOCIAL NEEDS

FROM CONFLICT TO INTEGRATION

The integration of students from Ukraine into the Polish school environment depends on several factors:

Individual characteristics and experiences (e.g., age, experience of fleeing Ukraine)

Family environment (e.g., family situation, parental support)

Influence of the school (e.g., openness of Polish teachers, relationships with students

The schools surveyed in the study had between a dozen and over a hundred students from Ukraine. They also had students from other countries, primarily Belarus, but also from Azerbaijan, India, and Georgia.

During the study, we observed the full range of possible attitudes and reactions in peer relationships: from conflict to isolation to mutually satisfying integration. This range of attitudes could even be observed within a single school.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

ALL WITHIN ONE SCHOOL

In one school, students—both Polish and Ukrainian—reported a high degree of national tension.

According to a survey conducted by the teaching staff, 34% of the students had experienced discriminatory behaviour.

Children from Ukrainian foster care studying in the preparatory year had only limited knowledge of Polish and were almost exclusively exposed to the Ukrainian community.

At the same time, some Ukrainian schoolgirls were members of the student council, achieved high academic results, and formed friendships with their Polish peers.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In addition to the challenges, schools that have tried to avoid ad hoc measures and implement procedures to integrate refugee students from Ukraine also report successes.

Principals and teachers recognize the positive changes in the integration of children from Ukraine over the past two years. This is also confirmed by the students from Ukraine and their parents.

DAY CARE AND EARLY PRIMARY EDUCATION

The space where bonds between Ukrainian and Polish children are most vividly forged is in the day-care room and early primary school classrooms.

> *"I also have 2 or 3 hours in the day-care room, and that's where the younger children are. T**hey form relationships very quickly** and communicate well while playing."* [PS2 IDI principal]

ABSORB POLISH LIKE A SPONGE

> *I've also had children who don't really cause any problems. They absorbed everything like a sponge, including our Polish language, and they speak fluently now. They get along well with the other children. I know they also socialize outside the classroom, invite each other to birthday parties, and are well-liked. (...) These children have integrated well and function very nicely. There's no real dominance of one group over the other.* [PS2 IDI early primary teacher1]

JAREK SENDS PHOTOS TO HIS MUM

> *I feel like each of us is trying to integrate children from Ukraine into the class, to help them feel at home. I have such a relationship with Jarek's mum [Ukrainian student, grade 3]. When we're out somewhere, Jarek comes up to me and asks if he can take a picture with my phone to show his mum. I say, 'Jarek, **no problem.' He poses, takes the picture, and sends it to his mum. Then I get a thank you from her, with smiley faces, suns, and so on**. She's incredibly grateful to see her child, how he functions in the school group, and how he feels in this environment.* [PS2 IDI early primary teacher2]

WAR WEIGHS ON RELATIONSHIPS

The war casts a shadow over relations between students from Poland and Ukraine.

However, some Polish students perceive their peers from Ukraine as economic immigrants rather than war refugees. They see them as people who left voluntarily to work abroad, rather than fled their country due to war. This distinction has significant consequences.

The experience of war creates a cognitive barrier between the two groups.

Polish students are not directly affected by the war in Ukraine and often have only a vague understanding of it. For students from Ukraine, on the other hand, war dominates everything. Even if they haven't experienced it firsthand, they still feel a profound sense of loss and victimization.

According to teachers and experts, older children tend to have a harder time coping with the refugee situation due to their more developed sense of identity, stronger social bonds, and heightened emotional and social development. While younger children may be more flexible in adapting to new conditions, this does not mean they are unaffected by trauma. Their reactions may simply be less extreme. The older the child, the more acute their response to leaving behind their previous environment: home, family, friends, sports clubs, etc. Extreme reactions may include rebellion, verbal and physical aggression, apathy, withdrawal, or depression.

If I were to say something about the war, I think they wouldn't listen to me because it doesn't interest them [Polish peers]; it doesn't concern them. ***For them, it's happening somewhere far away. It would be boring for them to listen to us.***
[VS6 DDI UA students 1]

In short, ***they laugh at our suffering****. They simply do not understand what it's like.*
[VS6 DDI UA students 2]

Not everyone is from places where there was fighting. I think ***some families just took advantage of the opportunity****.*
[PS FGI PL students]

MORE DIFFERENCES THAN SIMILARITIES

Polish and Ukrainian students' narratives about their peers focus more on differences than similarities.

The aforementioned cognitive barrier leads to misinterpreting the situation of Ukrainians in Poland. Questions directed at young Ukrainians, such as 'Why aren't you in Ukraine defending your country?' not only place unachievable moral expectations on them but also highlight the absence of open discussions in schools about the reasons why Ukrainians fled to Poland and the current situation in Ukraine.

> *Some relations between Ukrainians and Poles* ***were simply perfect, but that's no longer the case.*** *They started asking why we fled Ukraine and why we aren't defending our country.*
> [VS6 DDI UA students 1]

> *The Poles started talking about the war when two rockets hit Polish territory. They immediately claimed that they had come from Ukraine, and* ***their opinions began to change****. Before that, they were either silent or supportive of us, but after that, their attitude started shifting. I think it was influenced by their parents' opinions. (...) Maybe they don't mean it.*
> [VS6 DDI UA students 1]

> *The Poles have their own style and behaviour, and we have ours.* ***We are on different levels and can't get along with each other.*** *We have different views on life and everything else. We were in our own country, brought up in our own way. Here, people behave differently and have been influenced differently by their parents.*
> [PS4 TRI UA students]

> ***We have different lives,*** *different interests.*

> ***We didn't like each other at first sight.*** *(...) The Poles laughed at us and gave us strange looks.*
> [VS6 FGI UA students]

In the 2022/2023 school year, a separation between the two communities – Polish and Ukrainian – was observed forming in schools. The two nationalities functioned in the school space side by side rather than together.

In the current 2023/2024 school year, the situation has worsened.

The sense of separation is keenly felt by most students, both Polish and Ukrainian.

This is particularly noticeable in preparatory and foreign classes, which are almost completely isolated within the school environment. In the perception of Polish students and teachers, they live their own, separate Ukrainian lives.

Even in mixed classrooms, strong national divisions are often apparent. While the two groups are not openly in conflict, they largely function separately from each other.

> *I have the impression that children from Ukraine stick together, and we Poles also stick together. We don't spend much time together (...) It seems to me that* ***these are simply two different groups.***
> [PS5 FGI PL students]

> *All the Poles in the class are against us.* ***We are just guests here.***
> [VS6 DDI UA students 2]

DEEPENING SEPARATION

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

A FIRECRACKER IN A SNOWBALL

In one of the schools investigated, a group of teenagers was having a snowball fight. When a Ukrainian boy hit a Polish boy with a snowball, the latter wanted to retaliate. The Polish student then put a firecracker inside a snowball and threw it at his schoolmate. Fortunately, the firecracker did not cause any serious injuries, but the incident strained relations between the two groups.

> *For me, school is about meeting friends and learning something new. An interesting place to be in. It was like that in the beginning, before the conflict [described above] (...) After the conflict, I had much less desire to go to school. Now everything has somehow gone back to normal; it's OK. We let each other be.* [VS6 DDI UA students 1]

BELARUSIANS AND POLES TOGETHER, UKRAINIANS SEPARATELY

In another primary school, half of the fourth grade consists of foreign children (from Ukraine and Belarus). The class is split between Poles and Belarusians on one side, and Ukrainians on the other. A Ukrainian student describes the group dynamics as follows:

There are several children in our class, both boys and girls, who tell us to go back to Ukraine. They call us names and swear at us. We report it to the teacher. She admonishes them, but it doesn't help. They push us or throw things at us.
[PS1 DDI UA and BL students]

However, according to the teachers, children from Ukraine are not merely passive victims and also instigate various quarrels themselves.

Students from Poland rarely spend their free time with students from Ukraine. Occasional visits outside of school — such as for birthdays, playdates, or study sessions— do happen, but they are relatively uncommon.

This suggests that either their Polish peers do not invite them, or students from Ukraine decline such invitations. Polish-Ukrainian romantic relationships are rare, and when they do occur, they can lead to other types of tensions:

> *A Ukrainian boy took a Polish boy's girlfriend away, and that was enough to spark a conflict.* [GS7 IDI psychologist]

On the other hand, almost every Ukrainian student said they had a good friend among the Poles. Someone they could trust. The same applies to relationships with teachers.

> *Everyone has a Polish friend.* [DDI UKR student]

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

ARTEM SHOWED, HOW A ROCKET HIT HIS HOUSE

Sometimes, Polish students show empathy and invite their Ukrainian peers to join their group.

The students note that Artem talks about his experiences to gain acceptance, which suggests that they see him more as a victim of a difficult situation than as an equal friend.

Artem talks about what happened there because he wants to share with us what he experienced and what's happening there now.

He showed me a video of a rocket flying straight into his house, blowing everything up.

But also, in my opinion, Artem talks about it simply because he wants to make friends with us. He cares.

He's afraid; he doesn't want to be here on his own. Even during breaks, he comes up to me and asks if we're going to do something together. [PS2 FGI PL students]

INTEGRATION - ATTEMPTS WITHOUT RESULTS

Students from both nationalities make similar allegations. Both communities claim that the other group is closed off to contact. Both also state that they have tried to establish positive relations, but their efforts were rejected by the other side.

Ukrainians seem more disappointed by the lack of progress in forming connections with Poles over the past year. They are pessimistic about the chances of improving relations in the future. They also note that better knowledge of Polish does not necessarily lead to friendships with Polish peers.

The statements from both sides mostly reflect indifference and acceptance of the current situation. Compared to previous years, there is less emotion and more rational thinking in the responses of students from Ukraine. They do not dwell on the reasons for the lack of integration but instead develop coping strategies, forming *de facto* isolated groups.

> *Our class tutor once said, 'Look at Dasha, you've made friends with her'. She was trying to highlight some positive qualities in Ukrainians to show them to the Poles. But it didn't help – if a Pole doesn't like a Ukrainian, they won't change their mind. This can only work if the Ukrainian has lived here for 10 years and speaks perfect Polish. Then the Poles might consider being friends with them.*
> [PS5 IDI UA student 1]

BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION: LARGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES IN CLASS

The more students from Ukraine in one class, the greater the risk of isolation and a lack of integration.

The integration of refugee students into the Polish school environment depends on various factors. In the case of students from Ukraine, a sense of stability, time of arrival, and personal motivation have a significant impact.

The number of children from Ukraine in a single classroom is particularly important in this regard.

> *In general, children from Ukraine tend to isolate themselves. If there is only one or two in a class, there is integration. But if we have a class, where there are many students from Ukraine,* ***they tend to stick together.*** *And from what I hear, they don't integrate much with Polish students after school either.*
> [GS7 IDI principal]

> *(...) Now we have a mix of students from different backgrounds, and it's noticeable. I have one student who stands out from the rest of the Ukrainian group in terms of knowledge, commitment, and language skills. Sometimes, I even praise him more than the Polish students. (...) But the rest of the group has become isolated, and no matter what we do, we now realize it was a mistake to place such a large group of students from Ukraine in one class. We didn't anticipate it would become such a burden.*
> [VS6 IDI vocational teacher]

BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION: SHRINKING SPACE AND LIMITED TEACHER COMPETENCIES

THE SPACE FOR INTEGRATION IS SHRINKING

Schools have started to treat the presence of refugee students as the new normal. However, they rarely take active initiatives to effectively integrate foreign children into the Polish educational system, despite teachers noting that many of these students are apathetic and withdrawn, not engaging in learning or school life.

Incidental events, such as joint class outings or sleepovers at school, are often considered sufficient, though attendance by children from Ukraine at these events varies.

Last year we took part in the Schools with Class programme; we staged, for example, Polish-Ukrainian charades. This year, there's no need because they already get along well on their own. [PS4 IDI maths teacher]

Teachers who have limited classes in a school and are not class tutors often do not feel responsible for fostering relationships between students or integrating the class, regardless of the students' nationality.

TEACHERS' COMPETENCIES IN INTEGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM ARE NOT IMPROVING

As in previous years, many teachers believe that their classrooms integrate 'spontaneously', and therefore, there's no need to develop specific competencies in this area.

Most teachers have participated in professional development in recent years, but this has primarily involved webinars and other short-term training formats.

Teachers rarely approach working with a culturally or nationally diverse classroom from a multicultural perspective. Students from Ukraine are often treated as just another group of students with special educational needs, and the challenges teachers face when working with them are viewed as specific issues unrelated to nationality.

ABSENCE FROM SCHOOL TRIPS AND EVENTS

Teachers noted that not all students from Ukraine participate in class outings or school trips. From the teachers' perspective, the reason is not financial, as many events are free and parents are often willing to pay for less well-off students, but rather a lack of willingness to integrate.

POLISH SCHOOLS HAVE A PROBLEM WITH BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The collected data points to a broader problem within Polish schools. Researchers have identified issues with fostering relationships and a lack of awareness among teachers, and more broadly, the school community, regarding the impact of relationships on learning effectiveness.

WHAT FOSTERS POLISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONSHIPS

PROGRAMMES SUPPORTING WORK WITH MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS

Several schools participated in nationwide programmes for schools, such as workshops on various diversities (including, but not limited to, disability) and a language learning programme.

Two schools also implemented activities for students within programmes that support children's wellbeing.

All of these initiatives were evaluated very positively: as supporting teachers in their work and responding to students' needs.

Such activities, even if not directly aimed at students from Ukraine, can have a clear positive impact on addressing the emotional and social needs of this group.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering creates a space for integration. In a primary school in a large city, this programme has a long-standing tradition and focuses on supporting the most deprived residents of the locality (e.g., those experiencing homelessness).

Currently, of the approximately 50 volunteers, half are students from Ukraine. The supervisor of the school's volunteer club acknowledges that these students are proficient in the Polish language.

> *[Students who speak less Polish] tend to withdraw very quickly because they don't understand what we're talking about. Or when we go somewhere, for example to a care home, they remain on the sidelines, thinking, 'How am I going to manage?'* [IDI volunteering supervisor]

STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE AS SEEN BY THEIR POLISH PEERS

The attitude of Polish students towards their Ukrainian peers spans a continuum from hostility or dislike, through indifference, to openness and friendliness. In addition to language barriers and the tendency to separate into their own groups, Polish students are often irritated by certain behaviours of their Ukrainian classmates. In this context, they use terms such as ‘arrogance’, ‘overconfidence’, ‘ingratitude’, ‘rejecting an outstretched hand’, ‘aggressiveness’, or ‘taking liberties’.

“THEY REJECTED AN OUTSTRETCHED HAND”

> *There are, of course, those who are OK and I don't want to generalize, but for some, nothing seems to suit them. And I think if something doesn’t suit them, they can go back to their own country. For example, when they first joined our class, we welcomed them with open arms, everything was OK, but suddenly they started calling us names and looking down on us, as if this was their country, not ours.* [PS1 FGI PL students]

A PERSISTENT PROBLEM WITH GRADING

A sense of unequal treatment by teachers persists. Despite the supposed end of ‘special treatment’, Polish students feel that teachers still grade Ukrainians more leniently. This creates a sense of injustice:

> *The teachers favour them terribly, the Ukrainians. In the end, a Ukrainian gets an A in Polish, even though he shouldn’t, based on his average. Meanwhile, I get a B, even though my grade average was an A.* [PS1 FGI PL students]

SIDE BY SIDE

Polish students state that their initial curiosity about Ukrainian peers has faded. They also no longer feel responsible for welcoming them, something they did at the beginning. Over the last year, there has been little progress in closer integration between students from Poland and Ukraine: Polish students do not express a desire to form close friendships or spend time together outside of school.

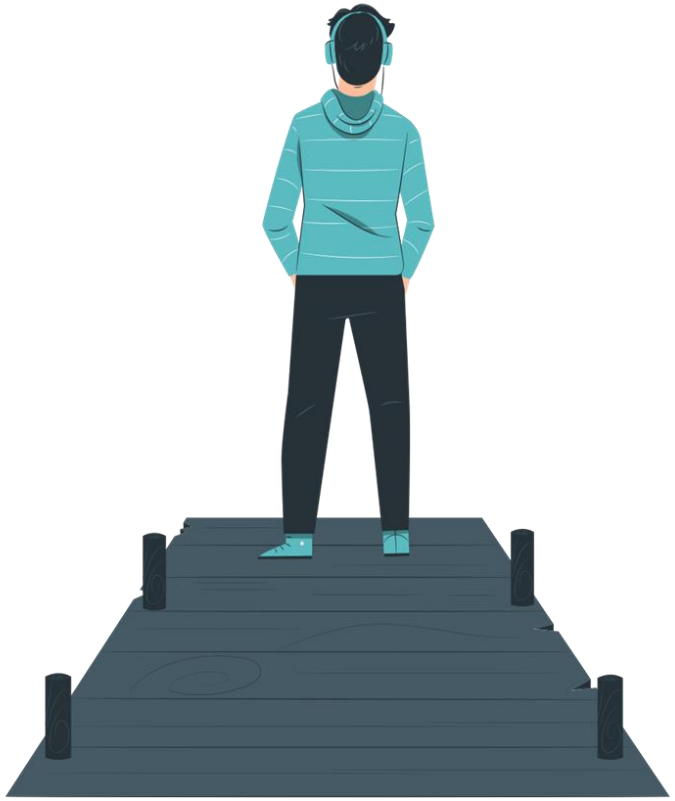
> - *They have their friends, and we have ours.*
> - *Yes! This is how it is: Ukrainians stick with Ukrainians, and Poles stick with Poles.* [VS6 FGI PL students]

THE RISK OF GENERALIZATION

Reprehensible behaviour demonstrated at school by individual students from Ukraine can foster the belief that all students from this group behave in a similar way, which, in turn, stigmatizes the entire Ukrainian community. Such situations have been observed in the schools researched.

The perception that some students from Ukraine are less capable or less engaged in school life not only diminishes their motivation to change but often leads to overgeneralization — applying these characteristics to the entire group. This, in turn, leads to further isolation of students from Ukraine and deepens their negative perception within the Polish school community. Such dynamics create a vicious cycle where prejudice influences behaviour, reinforcing stereotypes.

The study revealed that when students from Ukraine in preparatory classes speak less fluent Polish, struggle academically, or display behavioral issues, these traits are often attributed to the entire class. Negative opinions about the so-called 'Ukrainian class' spread quickly, and teachers may start viewing the group as 'challenging,' sometimes leading to reluctance in working with these students. This exacerbates their marginalization, replacing dialogue with reinforced stereotypes.



Peer conflicts with ethnicity in the background

In the researched schools, there were many stories about misunderstandings and conflicts involving students from Poland and Ukraine. Most often, these were peer conflicts – similar tensions occur between children and young people in general, regardless of ethnicity.

Nevertheless, peer conflicts sometimes took on an ethnic form through the language used. Polish students resorted to calling out ethnicity more often than their foreign peers. As the majority and dominant group, they were able to use such language from a position of power. During arguments, children know what can hurt the other side and do not hesitate to use such words. They say things without understanding the real meaning of their words – things that sound drastic to an adult ear.

> *There's one boy from another class. He used to call me names all the time. I told him to stop. And **he replied that I won't do anything to him because I am Ukrainian**. I do not belong here, so **I should go back to Ukraine and get killed**.*
> [PS5 FGI UA students]

> *There are mainly Polish children in my class. I sat with a girl who kept telling me: 'Y**ou are Ukrainian, you have no rights here, go back to Ukraine**'.*
> [PS5 IDI UA student 1]

> *When we argue, they tell us all sorts of things. For example, [they tell us] to go to Ukraine and see if our houses are still standing. **If they don't have any other arguments, they'll call you names for being from another country**.*
> [PS1 FGI UA and BY students]

> *I am afraid to make friends with people, and I have never approached Poles. I've been here for two years now, and from the very beginning, I studied in a Ukrainian class. **I was afraid to get to know Poles because there was a situation when they told my classmates: 'Go back to your Ukraine.'** That's what they say, but not all of them. There are also some good, nice Poles. But it's hard. Well, we are already at a level where we understand that they are just stupid.*
> [PS4 TRI UA students]

VIOLENCE AND INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

In schools, we came across multiple **stories of students from Ukraine who have experienced violence and discrimination from Polish students on grounds other than their nationality**.

Intersectional discrimination can have serious psychological and social consequences. Such multidimensional experiences of violence lead to a deeper sense of isolation, lower self-esteem, and increased stress. Unlike Polish students, who may experience similar problems, Students from Ukraine have to deal with the additional burden of the refugee experience.

LACK OF ANTI-DISCRIMINATION EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

In the 2023/24 school year, none of the surveyed schools reported organizing any anti-discrimination workshops to address the problems described. Teachers focus on responding to the problem rather than preventing it.

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

I'M OFTEN CALLED 'FAGGOT'

A secondary school student from Ukraine experienced verbal violence in the form of offensive and homophobic comments related to his social media activity. His reluctance to escalate the conflict may stem from not feeling supported or believing he has the influence to change the situation.

The Poles at school don't like me very much because I have a TikTok account (...) They think that if a boy records TikToks, he must be gay. I'm often called 'faggot' and stuff like that. I don't generally pay attention to that. It used to affect me, but now I'm indifferent to it. I just don't want it to escalate into a conflict so that it doesn't get worse. (...) ***If I tell the teachers about it, it will get even worse*** *(...) Some of the Poles, even the majority, are neutral. They may say something offensive, but they may say hello as well.* [VS6 DDI UA1 students]

THEY SHOW OFF TO HASSLE

In another school, students from Ukraine are ridiculed and insulted because of their less privileged financial status.

Many Poles dress in a fashionable, modern way. They show off and tease Ukrainians. They tease us to show that we are not on the same level, that they are superior. But let's be logical: Ukrainians are more intelligent and have better technologies.
[PS5 FGI UA students]

Teachers are surprised to see an increase in discriminatory behaviour among students of early primary education

This observation applies to all students - both Polish and foreign.

Teachers attribute this to a lower level of socialization among children in early primary education, who are still unfamiliar with social norms. In their view, the number of conflicts is also directly related to the exponential increase in emotional problems among younger children

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

THEY SPAT IN A GIRL'S FACE OUT OF JEALOUSY

A Polish boy and girl from Grade 3 of primary school spat in the face of their Ukrainian classmate. They also threatened her, saying that a bus would come and take all the students from Ukraine from the school back to Ukraine. The school authorities called the parents, reprimanded the Polish students, and lowered their behavioural grades. One of the teachers explained the situation as a reflection of attitudes and views transferred from home to peer relationships.

That really hurt me. They had no arguments. They couldn't explain to me why they did it. I think it's about jealousy because of the amount of work these girls put in, because of their achievements. That's how I explain it to myself. It's the first time I've come across something like that. [PS3 IDI PSL teacher]

PEER VIOLENCE AMONG STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE

Conflicts also arise among students from Ukraine. According to teachers, when resolving these conflicts, Children from Ukraine resort to violent solutions more often than their Polish peers.

Teachers attribute this to a greater tolerance for physical aggression in both Ukrainian schools and families.

Aggressive behaviour can also be a reaction to displacement, leaving home and school, and the trauma of war. However, teachers seem to reflect less on these factors.

Regardless of the underlying causes, teachers emphasize the numerous educational challenges they face when working with refugee students from Ukraine.

"THEY SETTLE THEIR SCORES"

One teacher observed that children from Ukraine are socialized differently than Polish children and show more independence in resolving problems. While she views this independence as positive, she finds the violent ways of settling disputes unacceptable:

> *They [students from Ukraine], on the other hand,* ***settle their scores on their own, but they do it as if they wanted to kill****.* [PS3 IDI PSL teacher]

"NO ONE WILL KNOW WHAT IT WAS ABOUT"

Teachers also point out that they are often unable to determine the causes of conflicts between students from Ukraine due to language barriers and the children's behaviour.

We were on break duty, and my colleague and I were terrified because one boy was chasing another. (...) He literally wanted to rip the other one's skin off, get him, beat the hell out of him. We literally had to physically separate them. We don't know what it was about, and no one will ever know.
[PS3 IDI PSL teacher]

STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE INVOLVED IN INTEGRATION

At the other end of the spectrum – ranging from conflict, through isolation, to integration – are students who make every effort to integrate into the Polish school environment. They speak Polish fluently, achieve high academic results, and build close relationships with their Polish peers. They plan to continue their lives and careers in Poland. Such students can be found in every school.

Conversations with refugee students from Ukraine revealed the diversity within this group. In one group interview with teenagers from a single class, an interesting discussion ensued: one student complained that Poles are closed off and difficult to befriend, while his classmate remarked, 'But I have a Polish boyfriend.'

APPEARANCE MATTERS

*These students make **a significant effort to resemble Polish students** and to stand out less in terms of appearance, physique, and clothing. They look very similar (...).* [VS6 IDI principal]

THE SAME

You know, I don't want all these Ukrainian days; I want to be treated the same as everyone else. [IDI UA students]

SHE'S OUR LITTLE POLE

*My daughter is friends with one girl. I refer to her as our little Pole. She's brilliant at Polish, she can even outperform our [Polish] kids. She and my daughter study together, visit each other's homes, and serve each other meals. They talk a lot about culture. My daughter even tries to pick up a few words from her. It's like **they're getting to know one another.*** [PS4 IDI PL parent 2]

There is a recurring pattern in the collected material: highly integrated students from Ukraine tend to hide their national identity.

Although the concealing strategy may depend on many circumstances and vary in individual cases, it provides another piece of evidence of the assimilationist approach to integration in the researched schools.

There are Ukrainians who have become like Poles. They have been here for a long time, five or six years each, and they only talk to Poles. When I arrived, I was in a class with another Ukrainian. We all knew he spoke Russian and Ukrainian at home, but at school, he only spoke Polish. ***At school, he was like a pure Pole****. When he was asked to help me, to translate something, he refused, so as not to stand out from the other Poles.* [PS5 FGI UA students]

For refugee students from Ukraine not emphasizing their nationality can be a **consciously chosen integration strategy.**

A strategy aimed at avoiding standing out as 'the Other.'

Manifesting Ukrainian identity, even in neutral contexts, involves a certain risk: it can irritate Poles, which refugee students seek to avoid.

ENOUGH OF THIS POLISH-UKRAINIAN EXCHANGE

In some schools, refugee students from Ukraine not only do not want to be singled out because of their nationality, but, like their Polish peers, they also seem to have grown tired of showcasing their own culture.

> *They don't want to talk about Ukraine, about their culture. It's been done before; they don't want that. This year, they prefer neutral things, fun things, like the funny glasses day. When there was a film night, they came, and I asked if they needed Russian subtitles. They said, 'No subtitles, ma'am.'* [PS4 IDI teacher, student council supervisor]

The children, both Polish and Ukrainian, signalled that they were perhaps growing tired of the Polish-Ukrainian [exchanges] because they already knew everything, so how about something different. That's why we came up with other projects; for example, the entire last year was centred around deaf people's culture. We had workshops. [PS IDI school psychologist]

My son says he doesn't like it. (...) When someone keeps asking him to describe what it's like in Ukraine – how people live, where they shop – he's fed up. He feels singled out. [PS IDI UA parent]

DON'T POINT THE FINGER AT SOMEONE FOR BEING UKRAINIAN

The topic of cultivating Ukrainian identity is linked to the broader theme of managing a multicultural school. Principals approach this issue in very different ways. At some schools, various initiatives are undertaken to build knowledge about different nationalities and promote integration. One principal, however, deliberately avoids anything that would make foreign groups more visible, believing such practices work against rather than aid integration:

Some schools host a kind of fairs where Ukrainian women, OK, Ukrainian parents and children prepare, I don't know, Ukrainian food. I'm not saying such fairs are bad, because that's not the point. It is about integration, also about understanding their traditions. But honestly, in my opinion, this kind of practice is like pointing a finger at them. Highlighting that they are Ukrainian. I don't think there is a need for that. They should… blend in with us, be 'invisible', so to speak. [PS1 IDI principal]

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO CONFLICT AND ISOLATION

STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES

- Reproduction of national stereotypes.
- The false belief that Ukrainians 'live on social welfare'.
- The perceived 'lack of gratitude' from Ukrainians towards Poles.
- Expecting students from Ukraine to stop speaking their native language..

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

- Limited opportunities for students in preparatory and foreign classes to interact with the rest of the school community.
- High proportion of students from Ukraine in some classes.
- Lack of planning and management of integration processes.

EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

- Slow progress in learning Polish.

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND CULTURAL FACTORS

- A sense of temporariness and existential instability among students from Ukraine.
- Psychological costs associated with fleeing Ukraine.
- Cognitive barriers between students from Poland and Ukraine (the experience of war).
- Different approaches to conflict resolution among students from Ukraine (higher levels of aggression).

FAMILY SITUATION

- Insufficient or no parental control over refugee students.

CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

WHAT PROMOTES INTEGRATION

STABILITY AND A SENSE OF SECURITY

- Parents' decision to stay in Poland.
- Growing knowledge of the Polish language.
- Positive experiences from early primary education.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

- Small number of students from Ukraine per class.

MEASURES TAKEN BY TEACHING STAFF AND SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

- Initiating neutral events by the school that are unrelated to ethnicity but involve all students.
- Prompt and effective response by teaching staff to conflict situations.
- Class tutor hours devoted to addressing problems in the classroom and working on solutions.
- Conscious efforts by class tutors and teachers to promote integration within the class and the entire school.
- Organizing school trips and other extracurricular activities.
- Openness to student initiatives.
- Inclusion of students from Ukraine in the school student council.
- Promotion of sports activities (school sports circles, sports sections, tournaments, etc.).
- School participation in diversity projects and initiatives.

unicef
for every child

PARENTS OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE SCHOOL

Ukrainian parents – a collective portrait

While Ukrainian parents are positively surprised by the kindness and empathy of Polish school staff, the picture painted by the other side is more ambiguous. First of all, Ukrainian parents are **perceived as less 'demanding'** than Polish parents. They expect guidance and are generally not inclined to question the decisions of teachers and administration. However, the image of their involvement in their children's education is more complex.

There are **examples of much closer parent-school relations compared to Polish parents**, but the prevailing perception is the one of **low involvement** – essentially, the only form of contact occurs when something happens, and the initiative tends to come from the school.

At none of the locations did Ukrainian parents and guardians express negative opinions about the school. On the contrary, some directly expressed their disappointment with their children's attitude, feeling they did not fully benefit from the opportunities provided by Polish schools.

Compared to previous years, **communication with Ukrainian parents has improved**, mainly due to their better knowledge of Polish, as well as the introduction (in some schools) of information materials and documents in Ukrainian.

> ***They strive to give their children everything.*** *They organize trips, sightseeing, help them grow, protect them from violence. Even my son says that they have everything under control. They protect them [the students].* [PS6 IDI UA parent]

Ukrainian parents have different expectations [than Polish ones]: Please tell us what to do, and we'll do it,. (...) They don't enter into polemics; they tend to assume that if a teacher has called, it's not because student X said something inappropriate, it must be really serious. And their reaction is immediate. (...) Their approach is stricter, more disciplinary. [PS5 IDI psychologist]

I know Ukrainian mums better than Polish mums. ***They come more often, ask questions****. They talk more about what's going on in their lives, what jobs they have found.* [IDI Grade 4 teacher]

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Teachers and principals identified several important areas that could be strengthened through better communication with the parents of refugee students.

Schools lack information about students' family situation and their specific needs, such as how many caregivers a child has, their housing conditions, any extracurricular pressures, and the support they can receive in their learning process. Additionally, they lack information about the students' previous experiences, particularly about the circumstances of their departure from Ukraine.

At the same time, there were instances of active involvement or self-organization among Ukrainian parents that helped address behavioural problems or counteract students' declining attendance.

> *At school, we try to anticipate how today's decisions might impact things two months from now. (...) A lot of questions arise. Does what we are doing now make sense? Is there a better solution? (...) For this, it is necessary to have, for example, information about the child, about how things were in Ukraine. This presupposes some contact with the parents. I've spoken both to the principal and other teachers, in other schools too, and I know it varies greatly. Sometimes the parents are busy working, or they are simply not there.* [PS2 IDI teacher, vice-principal]

Communication

As in the case of Polish parents, communication takes place during meetings at school (whether incidental or during parents' evenings), as well as through the electronic class register, emails, and phone calls.

Both the school and the parents acknowledge that communication is not frequent, and the initiative is usually left to the school staff.

Using the electronic diary is still a challenge for some parents, who prefer email or phone calls when they need to make contact.

From the class tutors' perspective, **it is helpful to find a 'doorkeeper' among Ukrainian parents – a person who mediates with other Ukrainian parents** and gathers feedback from them. Such mediation helps overcome their reluctance to express personal opinions, which is likely due to cultural differences. Ukrainian parents often communicate with each other through popular instant messaging services.

> *There are meetings. I have consultations, like today; **I always invite parents individually.** There are also meetings, like today's summary of the semester, a meeting with parents.* [PS2 IDI class tutor]

> *I have contact with a mother who is the class treasurer. But I actually get feedback from her about what they think of cooking workshops, going to the theatre, the Invisible Street, the cinema, bowling (...). She assists with this kind of environmental interview, but only within reason. There are questions that I believe the teacher absolutely should not ask.* [PS4 IDI class tutor]

UKRAINIAN PARENTS IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In many schools, the community supports Ukrainian parents through activities for their children: subsidizing lunches, trips, participation in events and outings, buying educational materials and textbooks. As Ukrainian families become financially independent, the spontaneous involvement of Polish parents decreases..

RECRUITMENT SYSTEMS

For Ukrainian parents, filling out applications in the electronic recruitment systems for secondary schools is a major challenge. Applying is stressful due to significant differences, both in the system itself and in how it is used (e.g., in Ukrainian systems, 'X' usually stands for a negative answer). Ukrainian parents were very appreciative of the meetings on the recruitment process held at schools..

> *The enthusiasm was great: 'We're helping, we're funding and so on' [about events organized for children]. (...) And when the [Polish] parents found out that the [Ukrainian] mum was working and getting by, well, the financial help wasn't the same as at the beginning. Now [her daughter] is rather treated on an equal footing with other children. (...) Well, in my class, like I say, at the beginning, everyone who wanted to was supportive. Some parents said, 'I'll finance it, no worries, I'll buy lunch. And it's no issue if I pay for the trip.' (...) I always told Janek's [UA student] mum, 'Don't worry, Janek will have his lunch covered for this or that month.' And I usually received a text message from her saying, 'Thank you very much.' " [PS2 IDI teacher]*

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

There are no activities to support parents in this area. Only one school organized activities to assess the psychological situation of Ukrainian families, but this was a one-off project

INCLUSION IN THE COMMUNITY

Interaction between Polish and Ukrainian parents is minimal. This is mainly due to language barriers, work schedules that prevent involvement in school life, and the lack of plans to settle permanently in the area. Few Ukrainian parents are involved in the parent council or take an active part in meetings. The active ones are mainly those who plan to stay in the area.

> *Polish parents are indifferent towards Ukrainian parents. They don't take their opinion into account, maybe because they sit quietly. Discussions take place between Poles, and Ukrainians don't get involved.* [PS4 IDI teacher, class tutor]

CHALLENGES

NO CONTACT

The observation from previous years regarding the lack of involvement from some parents – already mentioned in this section – persists. It is difficult to assess to what extent this differs from the cooperation with Polish parents, especially in secondary schools.

Certainly, limited language competence, reluctance to disclose the family situation, and – in the case of single-parent families – the unavailability of the parent during school hours play a significant role in contacts with Ukrainian parents.

The schools surveyed tried to address this issue in various ways, most often by intensifying telephone contact. But other solutions were also worked out. In one school, a contract was signed with a student's mother to ensure regular contact with the class tutor.

> *As a school, we don't have any power to force this parent of a foreign child to come to school. Very often it's also due to their working conditions, because these are people who work in shifts. Second, third shift, so they explain that they cannot be at school at this or that hour. But that's just an excuse, because first of all, we have our fixed hours of availability, which are in the afternoon precisely, so that parents can come in the afternoon. We make individual appointments.* ***Especially as these are usually difficult conversations because, firstly, they don't fully understand each other, and secondly, because the parents or carers of children from Ukraine speak much worse than the young people themselves.*** [VS6 IDI principal]

> *We also feel that there's such resistance when it comes to students from Ukraine. It is a big problem, as we see it, to talk about their family; it is a taboo subject. And I understand that they want to protect their privacy.* [VS6 IDI pedagogue]

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

LACK OF SUPPORT AT HOME

In most single-parent families, (even temporary) financial difficulties forcing the parent to work long hours lead to reduced support for the child's home study. Additionally, students are often burdened with other responsibilities. If they are not studying remotely at a Ukrainian school, they may need to take care of younger siblings or even take up employment.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There is an ongoing problem with reluctance to seek psychological support, as mentioned in previous reports.

Teachers and principals pointed out another cultural difference. According to them, Ukrainian parents, accustomed to a more authoritarian educational system, **struggle to accept the more democratic approach in Polish schools, often interpreting it as a lowering of standards**. Psychologists and educators, on the other hand, pointed to a stricter approach to parenting compared to what is common among Polish parents.

Ukrainian parents, more so than Polish parents, expect their children to be independent and responsible: *'If he doesn't attend, so be it, he will drop out, but he will have to provide for himself when he turns eighteen.'* They find it difficult to understand the extent of the Polish school's responsibility for its students, such as the requirement for written consent for a child to go home independently.

> *Either it's a single parent, or no parent at all (SP5 IDI director)*

Some parents said that in Ukraine, there are more demands for children, that there is a lot more material, and that they learn more. (...) But they were surprised that we talk to them, ask them questions, and invite them for discussions. They said, this doesn't happen in Ukraine. But I also had some parents here who didn't want to cooperate at all. In our opinion, they didn't take care of their children. [PS2 IDI director)

*There is still **a culture of beating there, for example, whereas in Poland this no longer exists**. There is a lack of empathy, awareness, and education in this regard. (...) It's usually very tough there, **with a strong patriarchy and a strict upbringing**.* [PS4 IDI pedagogue]

MANAGING
A CULTURALLY DIVERSE SCHOOL

Multicultural management at the school level is lacking.

In the researched schools there were no systemic solutions in place to support the needs of culturally diverse students.

In previous editions of the study, the lack of a systemic approach to multicultural management was attributed to the need to respond to ad hoc challenges and the lack of adequate preparation and support from education authorities.

Currently, the narratives of principals and teachers are dominated by the issue of 'normalization'. There is a widespread belief that multiculturalism does not need to be managed in a special way because students from Ukraine are to be treated the same as Polish students. As a result, the focus has shifted to dealing with special educational needs, peer conflicts, and other challenges, but not in terms of cultural or ethnic differences. Integration is typically driven by the initiatives of individual teachers.

This school year, not a single teacher in any of the schools surveyed participated in professional development courses related to working in a multicultural environment. The last activities in this area mostly took place shortly after the escalation of the war. On the one hand, there is a lack of free training courses; on the other hand, teachers show low motivation to seek them out.

Only one school introduced a systemic solution (in 2022) by setting up a team to manage the integration of students with migrant or refugee background. However, the researchers were unable to determine the specific outcomes of the team's work. In another school, multiculturalism was incorporated into the prevention and education programme.

> *Students have the opportunity for this [integration] because they spend time together, they meet after lessons.* ***As for systemic solutions, well, I haven't heard of anything like that****.* [GS7 IDI principal]

> ***We quickly set up a Multiculturalism Team*** *to delegate responsibilities to people who deal specifically with these issues."* [PS IDI psychologist]

> *I don't know if I would like to [get trained on the topic of working with refugee students].* ***There aren't that many of these students, and I don't really want to do it, given the [students'] attitude*** *(...)*
> *I feel discouraged. Before, I felt like we had to help them (...) but now there's a bit of distaste as we approach them with open arms and get nothing in return, or even the opposite.* [GS IDI teacher]

MULTICULTURAL OR MONOCULTURAL SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

TOWARDS ASSIMILATION

The assimilationist tendencies noted in previous editions of the survey have clearly become more entrenched. The topic of multiculturalism is now reduced to the absence of visible differences. This is reflected in numerous interviews and symbolically demonstrated by the removal of elements showcasing the ethnic and national diversity of students from many school corridors.

> *At present, we treat them the same as Polish children. [GS7 IDI principal]*
>
> *Now, there is no need for integration activities. We had to move away from emphasizing the differences between us: no need to signal that something is Polish, something is Ukrainian. We started acting normally; those who have socialized are now regular members of our community. [PS4 IDI PL parent]*

ASSIMILATION AS A PROTECTIVE MECHANISM

In the narratives of the Ukrainian interviewees, the theme of non-differentiation is presented as a protective strategy.

USE OF THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE

Like last year, an extreme manifestation of the assimilationist practices implemented in some of the schools is the issue of speaking Ukrainian on school premises.While no formal bans have been mentioned, practices are moving towards restrictions, as detailed in earlier sections of the report.

> *We resist this a bit, because it's not about Polonization. But when students speak Ukrainian between themselves [during lessons], outside of group work, that's the element we want to exclude. It's not that we don't want to hear Ukrainian, but rather that they aren't learning the subject language in that lesson. However, they aren't restricted in any way. [VS6 IDI principal]*

ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD OF MULTICULTURALISM

PROMOTING CULTURE

The most frequently mentioned activities are those related to the dissemination of Ukrainian culture, often understood in a somewhat narrow sense, such as showcasing culinary customs, national, or religious traditions. Schools organize fairs where parents (mainly mothers) prepare Ukrainian food, along with occasional exhibitions or language fairs.

> *We had the International Day of Foreign Languages, where the Ukrainian stand was present. We also had an event for this publication, where the children performed, and our (Ukrainian student's name) beautifully sang a Ukrainian song.* [PS IDI principal]

PUBLICATION

An interesting initiative at one school was the creation of a small brochure with texts about the Polish school, written by students from Ukraine. The publication's creators described it as a way of giving the students a voice, which is why no language corrections were made. The brochure was produced with the support of local and regional authorities.

> *That's why there are many passages in 'Polish' rather than proper Polish, because we gave them the right to express themselves.* [PS IDI principal]

TEAM-BUILDING TRIPS

These trips are important from the teachers' perspective, as they offer a chance to better understand the newly enrolled students. They also provide an opportunity to build relationships among students and, as previous editions of the survey have shown, can be an effective tool for integration. This school year, however, there has been some resistance from Polish students, which may reflect broader attitudes towards integration.

MULTICULTURALISM IN PREVENTION AND EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Almost all of the schools surveyed lack activities focused on everyday school life, conflict resolution strategies, and the systematic integration of refugee students. Only one school has introduced a prevention and education programme that explicitly addresses multicultural issues. This initiative is reflected in the topics covered during class tutor hours (godziny wychowawcze} and the inclusion of the Ukrainian perspective in some subject classes. The inclusion of multiculturalism in the document agreed upon by the parents' council shows that it is a high priority for the school.

> *This [multiculturalism] is a theme at the school. The presence of students from Ukraine, for example, has led us to completely adjust the education and prevention programme. Not to turn it upside down, but to adapt it to their presence. We now cover completely different topics during class tutor hours, incorporating this multiculturalism.* [VS6 IDI principal]

Support for students from Ukraine

There is a lack of systematic knowledge about the family, financial, and housing situation of students from Ukraine.

In most cases, this knowledge is limited and is acquired incidentally, most often when larger one-off expenses arise (e.g., a trip). However, individual schools in the sample work closely with local welfare centres.

Recurring areas of support include:

- Purchase of textbooks and exercise books in secondary schools
- Provision of school supplies (stationery, notebooks, PE outfits, etc.)
- Subsidized lunches (usually from municipal or community family welfare centres)
- Financing students' participation in class trips and outings (using funds from the Parents' Council)

This support is systemic—it is primarily based on school institutions (including the Parents' Council), rather than a spontaneous initiative by specific staff members or Polish parents.

> *The financial situation of these families varies, and not all students are enrolled in lunch programs. At our school, we have a campaign called 'Give Away Your Lunch' (...) for example, if a child or a teacher is not at school that day (...) they report to the office that they can donate their lunch to someone else. Sometimes they go to our [meaning Polish] children, as some of them also face financial difficulties. But I have personally given lunch several times to this boy, whose situation is more challenging. He was initially a bit defensive about it, but he accepted it from me because we had already built a rapport. (...) I explained that it's not just him, that other children receive lunch as well.*
> [PS IDI pedagogue]

ABSENCE OF INTERCULTURAL ASSISTANTS

This school year, no intercultural assistants were employed in any of the schools surveyed.

A sense of the irrelevance of such support is evident in both schools that previously had an assistant and those that did not.

However, the reasons for the absence of assistants are more complex.

Many principals believe that the need for assistance has decreased due to the students' good knowledge of Polish and the small number of children who do not speak the language.

In contrast, many teachers are reluctant to have an assistant present during their lessons, viewing their presence as disrupting the work in the classroom.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE ASSISTANT'S ROLE

School management teams with no prior experience of working with intercultural assistants often have limited understanding of this form of support for foreign students.

> *It's the first time I've heard of such a thing as an assistant, that's one. And secondly, I certainly wouldn't have the resources for that... **I didn't know such a role even existed.*** [GS7 IDI principal]

There is also a general lack of understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of an intercultural assistant. Their role is often reduced to that of an interpreter.

(...) if an interpreter came to school, that would be great (...) so that they could at least communicate on a basic level, so that we could know what these kids are talking about. [GS7 ISI psychologist]

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES

School principals frequently mention a lack of funding for full-time assistants. Securing funds requires significant effort, particularly when the governing body does not provide support in this area.

> *I can't hire this person in any additional capacity because I don't have the vacancies for that. I don't have a role for which I could employ them. But I could probably use the help of such a person.*
> [PS IDI principal]

INTERCULTURAL ASSISTANTS

POLICY OF THE GOVERNING BODY

The availability of assistant posts in schools may be limited by decisions made by the governing body. One local authority interviewee noted the relatively small number (several dozen) of students from Ukraine in secondary schools in the district. At the same time, there is a large pre-war Ukrainian diaspora in the area, which led the interviewee to believe that the challenges faced by older students simply resolved themselves. In this context, the perceived role of assistants is primarily to bridge gaps in Polish language proficiency.

We also didn't have the need to employ an intercultural assistant. (...) These are simply young people. (...) They choose their own friends. In schools, it's very well organized. (...) There were children from Ukraine who spoke both Polish and Ukrainian very well, and they acted as interpreters when needed, which made the process smooth at our school. [GS IDI governing body].

THERE ARE SUCH NEEDS, THOUGH

There were also calls for such a role from principals, teachers, and the broader school environment. The presence of an assistant could help schools better plan and offer support tailored to the actual problems faced by students with migrant and refugee background.

Employing a person who speaks Ukrainian in every school, someone who would coordinate the whole issue (...) would certainly make things easier, as they could assess the real needs. Sometimes, we're guessing blindly: we give everything to everyone, which is a waste of money. We should approach things more sensibly: assistance should be targeted, specific. [GS7 IDI counselling centre].

COOPERATION WITHIN THE BROADER SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Local government institutions are the key partners of schools in supporting refugee students. NGOs contribute actively only in certain locations. In many schools, there is still a lack of awareness of the local support options available.

NGO support is more evident in larger towns and cities, but regardless of location, schools' ignorance of the services available in their neighbourhood remains a common issue.

This lack of awareness may stem from the fact that the presence of students from Ukraine has become normalized within the school environment. As a result, schools do not actively seek specialist support, relying solely on the standard procedures that apply to all students

In some cases, this ignorance is particularly surprising. In one town of several thousand inhabitants, the school principal was unaware of available resources to support refugee students. Additionally, the school psychologist pointed out the lack of a Ukrainian specialist, even though a Ukrainian psychologist has been working at the local counselling centre for two years, with the assistance program clearly described on the municipality's website

> *The children have meetings at the Polish Red Cross, and I know, for example, that they get very involved. (...) They often say things like, 'Today we're going on a trip with children from the Polish Red Cross.' They have a great time, and there was also a performance they organized. (...) There are various meetings,* ***and it helps both parents and children a lot that there are groups that support them and bring them together.***
> [PS2 IDI class tutor]

Local government institutions

The two most frequently cited local government units cooperating with schools are **centres that offer psychological and educational counselling and libraries.**

Libraries were mentioned as **organizers of various activities** related to reading and culture in a broader sense. Interestingly, cultural and community centres did not appear in the respondents' statements, which may suggest a shift in focus within local cultural policies.

> *We attended a meeting with an illustrator, and later there was an author with his book. We also participated in a library lesson and invited the librarian over. (...) We organized a campaign, 'Reading Break,' where we read throughout the entire break, and the librarian from the public library read to the kids. So, we established a nice collaboration.* [PS2 IDI class tutor]

Psychological and educational counselling centres provide support in line with their scope of activity. However, there are few available specialists knowledgeable in Ukrainian and diagnostic tools in this language. The common solution is to refer students to district institutions that employ such psychologists and use non-verbal diagnostic tools, or to rely on the support from non-governmental organizations (available only in larger cities).

Counselling staff mentioned the possibility of offering workshops or interventions, such as in conflict situations, on school premises. However, schools seem to have limited awareness of these services

> *The counselling centre is not a well-publicized institution, but it organizes a lot of different things, often with limited resources and staff. It's like that: when a school asks for a talk, lecture, or workshop, of course we provide it at the school. Often, the whole class benefits from it, including the Ukrainian child.* [GS7 IDI counselling centre director]

THE LACK OF AN INTEGRATION STRATEGY HAS SPECIFIC CONSEQUENCES FOR SCHOOLS

LOCAL INTEGRATION POLICIES

The strategies adopted by local governments vary according to the size of the locality and the scale of the refugee population. Larger towns and cities that have received more refugees and have greater resources (including NGO capacity), tend to implement more informed strategies. In contrast, smaller towns with fewer Ukrainian families often lack such strategies altogether.

For now, we are going to verify how many of these students we actually have. (...) ***There was no time to write policies; we had to act, to*** *provide direct help rather than sitting down to develop strategies from behind a desk – what purpose would that serve? Immediate, on-the-spot assistance, directed at those in need, was the most effective. (...) And does anyone even read these strategies afterwards? Does anyone actually look into them?* [GS IDI governing body, town of up to 20,000 inhabitants]

As a result, governing bodies tend to focus on fulfilling legal obligations (e.g., providing Polish language classes, social support). For some of their representatives, questions about the integration of refugee students led to evident confusion. This responsibility is largely delegated to schools

The district focused on providing additional hours of Polish language instruction for these children to attend school and on offering them psychological and pedagogical assistance. Meanwhile, the municipality handled tasks related to maintenance, ad hoc assistance, and day care centres. [GS IDI psychological and educational counselling centre]

But systematically, in terms of training teachers to work with children from Ukraine? We didn't have that kind of support as a school, no. As for financial resources, (...) Yes, I receive funding now, but it can only be spent on salaries. [PS2 IDI principal]

Even without explicitly addressing the issue of integration, governing bodies influence the process. Decisions such as whether to create preparatory departments or hire intercultural assistants significantly impact on the conditions under which schools operate,

When we were tasked with classifying them [children from Ukraine based on their knowledge of Polish], we ultimately received directives from above that there would be no preparatory classes, because you'd have to spend money on that, right? The local government made certain decisions, and we were informed that we were to enrol these [Ukrainian] children in regular classes and that they would later receive Polish language lessons. [PS2 IDI school secretary]

AUTHORS OF THE STUDY

Research team

Magdalena Tędziagolska

Sociologist, researcher, facilitator, and coach. For almost 20 years, she has been designing and leading research and strategic processes in the areas of education, social policy, culture, media, new technologies, and research on minority groups, youth, and the elderly. She uses design thinking to create useful solutions for the public, social, and business sectors.

Bartłomiej Walczak

Sociologist and cultural anthropologist. He works at the University of Warsaw and at the PAFF and the UW School of Education. Academically, he focuses on issues at the intersection of educational research, migration research, and evaluation in education.

Kamil M. Wielecki

Ethnographer and cultural anthropologist. He works at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include social transformations in the post-Soviet region, economic and philosophical anthropology, and the sociology of education.

Ivan Posylnyi

PhD student at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw. His research focuses on Russian colonialism towards Ukraine, and child welfare in occupied and unoccupied Ukraine and abroad.

Anna Biernat

Social researcher and service designer with practical experience in public participation. Her areas of interest include education, culture, and aging.

Pola Rożek

Ethnographer, researcher, and organizer of cultural events. She conducts qualitative field research and works on cultural and educational projects.

Andrzej Perzanowski

Ethnographer and social anthropologist. His research interests include social science methodology, narrative practices analysis, discourse theory, and the post-serfdom experience in contemporary Polish countryside. He has conducted field research, e.g., in the anthropology of psychiatry in Poland.

Anna Żelazowska-Kosiorek

Coach, facilitator, researcher, and social programme coordinator. She designs and conducts research in the fields of education, culture, and social affairs, and leads diagnostic and evaluation workshops.

.

Centre for Civic Education

We are an NGO that supports schools. We inspire them to use innovative teaching methods and address socially relevant topics with young people. Each year, we work with 40,000 teachers and principals from 10,000 schools across the country.

CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

Thanks to our solutions, schools teach more effectively. Young people are engaged in their education, have a better understanding of the modern world, and are able to make a difference.

Some of our activities include:
- Organizing educational programmes for teachers and principals to help them face their challenges,
- Holding workshops that improve the competences of school staff councils, student councils, and principals,
- Running an accredited teacher training institution,
- Operating an educational publishing house.

We are an independent institution with the status of a public benefit organization (PBO) and the largest educational NGO in Poland. Founded in 1994, we have received numerous awards for our activities and achievements, including the honourable badge of the Ministry of National Education 'For Merits to Education' and the title 'Pro Publico Bono Institution.'

Our partners include UNICEF, the Norwegian Refugee Council, CARE, the International Rescue Committee, the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, the European Commission, the Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as Google, ING Bank Śląski, mBank, and PNB Paribas.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach.

Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential. UNICEF provides and advocates for child health and nutrition, safe water, sanitation and hygiene, quality education and skill building, and protection of children and adolescents from violence and exploitation, in a safe and sustainable climate, free from poverty.

With the world's largest humanitarian warehouse and a global footprint, we are also the world's largest provider of vaccines.

Before, during and after humanitarian emergencies, UNICEF is on the ground, bringing lifesaving help and hope to children and families. Impartial, non-political, and neutral, our focus is protecting every child and safeguarding their lives and futures.

unicef

for every child

The UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland was established in March 2022 to support refugee children and families fleeing the war in Ukraine and help them recover. We work with the national and municipal government as well as civil society partners and other international organizations in Poland to keep these children learning, healthy and safe, with a focus on the most vulnerable.

Learn more at: www.unicef.org/eca/poland.

EDITORIAL FOOTNOTE

Translation: Aleksandra Szkudłapska

Proofreading and language editing: Elżbieta Krawczykowska

Layout and graphic design: Mateusz Hojda and Badania & Działania

Photos: UNICEF and CEO own resources

Graphics: Storyset

This research was conducted in cooperation with UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland. The materials, content and views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of UNICEF or the donor

CENTRUM EDUKACJI OBYWATELSKIEJ

unicef
for every child

Centre for Citizenship Education (CEO) Foundation

ul. Noakowskiego 10
00-666 Warszawa

www.ceo.org.pl
www.blog.ceo.org.pl

Kontakt
ceo@ceo.org.pl

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland

ul. Towarowa 25A
00-869 Warszawa

www.unicef.org/eca/poland

Kontakt
poland@unicef.org

Authors badania i działania

Magdalena Tędziagolska, prof. Bartłomiej Walczak, dr Kamil M. Wielecki

m.tedziagolska@badaniaidzialania.pl

CEO editorial and content consultation:

Elżbieta Świdrowska – expert and coordinator of the research "Refugee students from Ukraine in Polish schools"

Jędrzej Witkowski – Chairman of the board
Center for Civic Education

Michał Tragarz – coordinator of the project "Refugee students from Ukraine in Polish schools"

UNICEF content consultation:

Francesco Calcagno - chief of Education and Adolescent Development and Participation

Aleksandra Duda - Specialist in education section, aduda@unicef.org