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Teacher Competencies for Working with Migrant and Refugee Students

Policy Brief

Key findings:

- The widespread presence of students from Ukraine in Polish schools presents **new challenges** for the entire education system.
- These challenges relate to three types of student needs: **emotional, social, and learning**.
- An effective response to these challenges requires the development of teachers' competencies, particularly the acquisition of **new knowledge and skills**.
- The effective development of teaching staff depends on **appropriate conditions for in-service training**.
- Educational authorities should provide **training support** based on the recommendations presented.

Context

Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, thousands of young people from Ukraine have been integrated into the Polish education system. In the 2023/24 school year, a total of 348,400 foreign students attended Polish schools, including adult education schools and kindergartens. Of these, a significant proportion – approximately 290,000 – were from Ukraine. Between 180,000 and 188,000 were individuals with refugee experience, of whom 134,000 were school-age children and adolescents¹. Students from Ukraine with refugee experience are currently enrolled in 12,000 out of 21,000 schools in Poland.^{2,3}

These figures indicate that the Polish education system has, to date, successfully welcomed thousands of students from abroad, despite limited resources and minimal prior experience in educating students from different countries and cultures.

As of September 2024, compulsory schooling and education requirements were extended to include

school-age children and youths from Ukraine. Starting in September 2025, compliance with these requirements will be linked to the eligibility for 800+ and Good Start benefits,⁴ likely leading to another gradual increase in the number of students from Ukraine in Polish schools.

The situation poses new challenges for the Polish education system. The widespread presence of foreign students has become a new reality, giving rise to special educational needs. To address these, teachers require additional competencies. This policy brief outlines the new knowledge and skills teachers need when working with students from Ukraine and other countries. The final section identifies conditions that support the effective development of these teacher competencies, providing recommendations for creating systemic in-service training programmes in this area. The policy brief specifically concerns subject teachers working in regular classrooms.⁵

¹ In Poland school aged children and adolescents are people between 6 or 7 years old up to 18 years old.

² The above figures refer only to students from Ukraine with refugee experience; the share of foreign students in classes and schools is even higher.

³ All data is quoted from the report 'Refugee students from Ukraine in the Polish education system' prepared by the Centre for Citizenship Education in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (author: Paulina Chrostowska) based on various data sources:

• Otwarte dane (open data), Number of foreign students by country of origin – Polish Ministry of Education, Education Information System (SIO), status as at 30 Sep. 2023, <https://dane.gov.pl/dataset/1426/resource/57364/table>;

• Otwarte dane (open data), Number of foreign students by status – Polish Ministry of Education, Education Information System (SIO), status as at 30 Sep. 2023 <https://dane.gov.pl/dataset/1426/liczba-uczniow-cudzoziemcow-wedug-gmin/resource/57363/table>;

• Otwarte dane (open data), Refugee students from Ukraine by school type, grade and district (powiat), status as at 2 Apr. 2024, <https://dane.gov.pl/dataset/2711/resource/56018/table>.

⁴ The 800+ benefit is a monthly child-rearing allowance available to parents and guardians for each child under the age of 18. The Good Start benefit is a financial aid of PLN 300 for each school-age child under the age of 20 (or 24 in the case of children with disabilities), offered at the start of the school year.

⁵ The situation of specialist teachers, preparatory class teachers, and teachers of Polish as a Second Language warrants a separate analysis.

Special Educational Needs of Students

The educational integration model⁶ assumes a relationship between student needs, the challenges these needs pose to the education system, and the actions of teachers, who require appropriate competencies to respond effectively. Only if teachers acquire new competencies and take suitable actions can educational integration bring the expected benefits to the whole school community.



According to the educational integration model, student needs fall into three categories:

- **emotional,**
- **social,**
- **learning.**⁷

These needs have always existed, but with constant changes affecting school realities, their specific manifestations are evolving. The escalation of the war in Ukraine and its consequences – such as students from Ukraine leaving their country to seek safety and then beginning education in Polish schools – have made these needs particularly apparent. Importantly, while many of these needs are felt by students from Ukraine, they are also shared by their Polish peers and other international students. Though differing in intensity and met differently in various groups, most of these needs are common to all students.

The sequence in which student needs are addressed is crucial for the effectiveness of learning, and – by the same token – for the whole integration process. Schools should first address emotional needs, then social needs, and finally, learning needs. Although some needs are best addressed by trained school staff, such as psychologists or educational specialists, all teachers must be aware of these different types of needs. This is essential for successful learning in every class and subject.⁸

⁶ To identify the needs and challenges of the education system, the Centre for Citizenship Education (CEO) relies on a model of educational integration developed based on Polish research, foreign analyses, as well as good practices and experiences collected by Polish schools collaborating with CEO since February 2022. In line with the model, educational integration aims to support all students in their educational success regardless of their needs and where they come from.

⁷ Cerna, L. (2019), 'Refugee education: integration models and practices in OECD countries', *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 203, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a3251a00-en>. A broader analysis of the needs of refugee students from Ukraine in Poland is provided by the REACH & UNHCR report, *Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022*. The specific needs of children and adolescents are analysed in detail in the *Protection Needs of Children, Adolescents and their Caregivers Displaced from Ukraine to Poland* report by IMPACT Initiatives & Save the Children. Additionally, the Save The Children 2022 report, *'This Is My Life, And I Don't Want to Waste a Year of It'. The Experiences and Well-being of Children Fleeing Ukraine*, provides data on the well-being of these children.

⁸ Further information on the importance of education for children with refugee experience is provided in the UNHCR publication *Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis*.

SPHERE	KEY STUDENTS' NEEDS	KEY SCHOOL CHALLENGES
EMOTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to rebuild a sense of security (including stability and predictability); • The need for self-regulation and self-awareness; • The need to manage anxiety, fear, and apprehension; • The need to cope with separation, trauma, and loss (particularly for students from Ukraine). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater difficulties and emotional needs that hinder or block students' learning in the classroom; • Presence of students in need of specialist psychological or therapeutic support in the classroom; • Unfamiliarity of some new students and their families with school and classroom rules.
SOCIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for relationships with peers from different backgrounds and nationalities; • The need to belong, have agency, and influence in the class and school community; • The need to adapt to live in a culturally diverse environment; • The need to maintain one's own cultural and linguistic identity (particularly for students from Ukraine); • The need to understand the Polish cultural context, including educational culture (particularly for students from Ukraine). • The need to understand the culture of the countries which migrants and refugees come from, with a particular focus on the field of education (including awareness of educational system differences). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial disintegration of class teams and school community; risk of segregating students in non-formal interactions; • Cultural diversity in classrooms and schools and the challenges it poses, including the risk of discriminatory practices or conflicts; • Significantly reduced contact of students from Ukraine with their culture and language; interruption of their socialisation process; • Social difficulties faced by students from Ukraine due to forced migration and culture shock.

LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The need for effective knowledge and skills acquisition despite class diversity; ● The need to learn Polish – the language of communication and education (for students from Ukraine); ● The need to bridge curriculum and knowledge gaps after changing the education system and a period of distance learning; ● The need to understand the social and political situation (e.g. war, migration, and their consequences). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Language barriers hindering learning; ● Largely increased diversity in knowledge and skills within the classroom, along with a rise in the number of students with special educational needs; ● Lack of teachers' knowledge about new students' learning history, prior knowledge, environment, and special needs; ● Inconsistent interaction between teachers of different subjects using various teaching and assessment strategies for new students; ● Students' limited understanding of the causes of war and migration that directly affects them at school and in the community; they may react with anxiety, frustration, aggression.
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Source: own elaboration based on research conclusions and experience of the Centre for Citizenship Education.

New Knowledge and Skills for Teachers

To respond effectively to the new needs emerging in their classrooms and to transfer the challenges outlined above into opportunities for building more resilient societies, teachers will require additional knowledge and skills. These are outlined in the table below, organised into specific categories for ease of reference.

SPHERE	TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE	TEACHERS' SKILLS
Migration, Culture and Education Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic knowledge of students' countries of origin and their cultures; • Basic knowledge of the educational systems in students' countries of origin; • Understanding the differences between the educational system in the country of origin and the Polish core curriculum; • Knowledge of the legal conditions surrounding the presence of foreign students in the Polish education system. 	
Emotional Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the impact of migration and refugee experience (including war trauma) on students' functioning, well-being, and learning processes; • Basic knowledge of the emotional competencies needed by all students at school and the specific emotional needs of students with migration experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to identify the specific psycho-emotional needs of children with refugee and migration experience; • Skills to strengthen emotional resilience (particularly self-regulation and self-awareness) through simple educational and parenting interventions.
Social Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of the impact of new students on classroom cohesion and the principles for integrating new students into the class community; • Basic understanding of issues related to war, migration, and refugees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to integrate a class of diverse nationalities and cultures; • Ability to broach controversial topics related to migration, war, and refugees with students to verify oft-repeated information and build a community based on dialogue and understanding.

Intercultural Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding intergroup relations, ‘us vs them’ mechanisms of perception, stereotypes, and prejudices; ● Knowledge of intercultural education, including cultural dimensions, the impact of cultural differences on interpersonal relations, the recognition of intercultural similarities and differences, and diversity management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to identify and resolve conflicts based on nationality or culture; ● Ability to identify and address instances of discrimination, bullying, or violence related to nationality.
Polish as a Second Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding the differences between the language of communication and the language of instruction; ● Knowledge of essential subject-specific terms with translations into students’ native languages and of key concepts underlying instructions in subject tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to simplify language to make instructions and lessons more accessible to students.
Teaching and Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Familiarity with teaching approaches and methods that enable individualized learning and support balanced knowledge and skills in the classroom (e.g., individual work, pair/group work, differentiated tasks) as well as child-centred approaches ; ● Knowledge of assessment methods to support learning in a diverse classroom (e.g., formative assessment; differentiated success criteria, including progress and engagement; feedback; self-evaluation; peer assessment). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to use teaching methods appropriate to a culturally diverse classroom with students from various national backgrounds; ● Ability to apply assessment methods suited to a culturally diverse classroom with students from various national backgrounds; ● Ability to plan lessons and prepare materials that consider students’ cultural or personal backgrounds.
Support for the Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knowledge of the role and functions of intercultural assistants in schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to work with intercultural assistants to support learning; ● Ability to involve the parents of students from different nationalities.

Source: own elaboration based on research conclusions and experience of the Centre for Citizenship Education.

The above table presents the knowledge and skills required by all teachers working in classes that include even a single foreign student. However, four groups of teachers require additional specialist competencies: teachers of Polish as a Second Language, preparatory class teachers, teachers of students with special needs (including disabilities) and teachers working with Roma children with migration experience. These groups need other specific skills beyond those listed above, such as expertise in glottodidactics, working in mixed-age classrooms, teaching in a foreign language, and knowledge of Roma culture and traditions.

Teachers of Polish as a Second Language should have various competencies in glottodidactics, typically acquired during specialist postgraduate studies or as part of master's programmes. Ultimately, all teachers of Polish as a Second Language in schools should have formal glottodidactic training, either through postgraduate education (for new teachers) or intensive training

courses (for those who have been teaching the subject for the past two years without prior preparation). Additionally, it is essential for the Ministry of Education to define formal qualifications for teaching Polish as a Second Language as a separate subject.

Subject teachers, class tutors, and supervisors of preparatory classes should be prepared to work in mixed-age classrooms (which is not standard practice in Polish schools), be familiar with methodologies for teaching subjects to students with limited Polish proficiency, and, ideally, speak the students' native language.

Teachers working with Roma children with migration experience should also receive special guidance. In this case, it is essential to understand the cultural context affecting Roma students' experiences in the Polish education system and to be aware of practices that support their learning, especially with respect to collaboration with parents.



Conditions for Effective Teacher Development



When planning in-service teacher training, particular attention should be paid to adapting the format of training to the objectives set for the various elements of support. For example, one-off online meetings can be used to provide teachers with essential information (e.g., on legal requirements) or to introduce educational tools. However, such a format will not be sufficient for teachers to acquire and apply new skills sustainably. In this case, longer forms of support are needed, including practical in-service training (preferably blended learning or offline) and guidance from teachers with hands-on experience (e.g., through online or offline teacher consultations or communities of practice). Additionally, individual consultation may be required for addressing particularly challenging cases, such as crisis response, conflict resolution, or working with students with special educational needs.

Support for in-service training should be developed based on international research findings on effective teacher training. Researchers indicate that training activities can only be considered effective if they have a positive impact on teachers' practices and student achievement.⁹ Importantly, both conditions

must be met for an in-service training programme to be effective. This dual focus on teacher improvement and student outcomes also affects how the programme's effectiveness is assessed. Positive survey feedback alone is insufficient; lesson observation and analysis of student progress are equally essential.

There are seven key, complementary characteristics of effective teacher development, identified from studies evaluating the impact of professional development programs.:

1. Focus on learning content.
2. Use of active learning techniques and learning by doing.
3. Fostering collaboration, especially within the school.
4. Building on best practice and model solutions.
5. Offering expert consultation or coaching.
6. Stimulating reflection and providing feedback.
7. Long-term programme structure.

Each of these features is briefly described below.

⁹ Darling-Hammond, L., Hyle, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

1. Practical approach to teaching specific content

New skills should be acquired in the subject context. The most successful in-service training helps teachers implement new teaching methods in relation to specific subject content, making it possible to transfer the knowledge gained to everyday teaching practice.

2. Effective improvement happens in practice, not in theory

The most effective in-service training programmes engage participants in practical activities rather than relying solely on passive theory transmission. It is essential that teachers have opportunities to try out new methods and receive feedback on their effectiveness. Effective improvement takes place primarily in the classroom, through action and reflection. This process requires time, openness to sharing one's work, and a willingness to accept feedback from more experienced practitioners.

3. Collaboration and exchange of experience

Effective teacher training should incorporate the social nature of learning and foster skills that encourage collaboration. This can include joint lesson planning, analysis of students' work, peer observation, and exchange of feedback. These activities are conducive to effective improvement.

4. Models and examples of good practice

Effective training often incorporates specific examples and good practices, such as lesson recordings, case studies, or ready-made lesson plans, enabling teachers to see how new approaches work in practice.

5. Expert support and coaching

A key element of successful teacher training programmes is expert support from experienced practitioners who can model new approaches, stimulate reflection, and provide feedback.

6. Reflection and feedback are essential

Reflecting on one's own practice and sharing experiences with other teachers is crucial for gradual, continuous improvement. The opportunity to receive constructive feedback and make adjustments based on suggestions is also valuable.

7. A long-term process

Teacher change takes time and cannot happen overnight. The most effective programmes involve long-term support, spanning several months or even years.¹⁰

¹⁰ Additional research findings on the quality of education and in-service training are presented in Alicja Weremiuk and Wioleta Dobosz-Leszczyńska's expert opinion, 'Effective forms of in-service teacher training in developing pro-innovative competencies', published in 2022 by the Centre for Citizenship Education.

Proposed Modules of the Comprehensive Teacher Support Programme

Given the above considerations, a comprehensive teacher support programme could be divided into separate modules, organized into three groups:

- mandatory for all teachers,
- optional for subject teachers, but mandatory for class tutors,
- optional for all.

Proposed modules of the comprehensive teacher support programme

1. The impact of migration experience on the educational process and the resulting special needs of foreign students.
2. Working with foreign students – legal aspects.
3. Special psycho-emotional needs of students with experience of forced migration and war trauma, and psychological first aid.
4. Working in the classroom with foreign students – teaching methods.
5. Working in the classroom with foreign students – assessment methods.
6. Adapting subject content to the needs and abilities of foreign students.
7. Adapting the language of instruction to the needs of foreign students and teaching the language of instruction.
8. Identifying and resolving conflicts based on nationality or culture, and responding to instances of violence, bullying and discrimination.
9. Methods for integrating foreign students into the classroom, including elements of intercultural education.
10. Effective communication with students and parents with refugee experience.
11. Preparing to work with Roma students arriving from Ukraine.
12. Support for teachers working with foreign students who have special educational needs.
13. Cooperation with intercultural assistants.

Summary and Recommendations

The escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022 has led to a rapid increase in cultural, linguistic, and national diversity in Polish schools. To address this challenge effectively, teachers require support from educational authorities and local authorities.

In view of the conditions outlined above, the following recommendations for supporting the competencies of teachers and school management are proposed:

1. Provide training support without delay:

Teachers should receive timely training support. If systemic support programmes cannot be launched immediately, arrangements should be made to ensure access to training during the transition period.

2. Leverage existing know-how: Training programmes should draw on the experience and expertise developed including over the last years by institutions that have already carried out similar initiatives, including local government institutions, teacher training centres, community organizations, and international bodies.

3. Promote good practices: Training should incorporate and promote effective practices developed in Polish schools including over the last two years. Materials and solutions based on these experiences will be more relevant to the Polish educational context and credible for teachers.

4. Programmes based on research: Training support should be designed in accordance with findings from research on the effectiveness of teacher training programmes.

5. Offer flexible training formats: Training programmes should range from one-off online meetings to blended, long-term, process-oriented school support initiatives. The format should be tailored to teachers' specific needs, the extent of their contact with students with forced migration experience, and their motivation.

6. Involve educational authorities: The Ministry of Education and education superintendents should actively participate in the implementation of training support, emphasizing the importance of developing these competencies together. This could include co-creation, issuing joint invitations or providing patronage.

The responsibility for designing and implementing support rests with educational authorities, teacher training institutions, and the social partners of schools. It is essential to equip teachers with the tools and support needed to turn diversity into a valuable resource for learning, fostering the development of students' social and cultural competencies, and creating an inclusive school environment.

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