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Between integration and assimilation. Ukrainian students in Polish schools

Między integracją i asymilacją. Uczniowie z Ukrainy w polskich szkołach

Abstract: The aim of this article was to make an attempt to outline the perception of the acculturation process of Ukrainian children in Polish schools in their parents. Applying Berry's theory of acculturation, it was demonstrated that the systemic solutions concerning the education of children of a national minority in public institutions are rooted in the classical model of assimilation. The attitudes of the children's parents who came to Poland for work or to escape war also indicate a desire to assimilate their children in the school environment as soon as possible, and at the same time to separate them in the home environment or in the group of compatriots.

Keywords: integration, assimilation, Ukrainians students, Polish schools

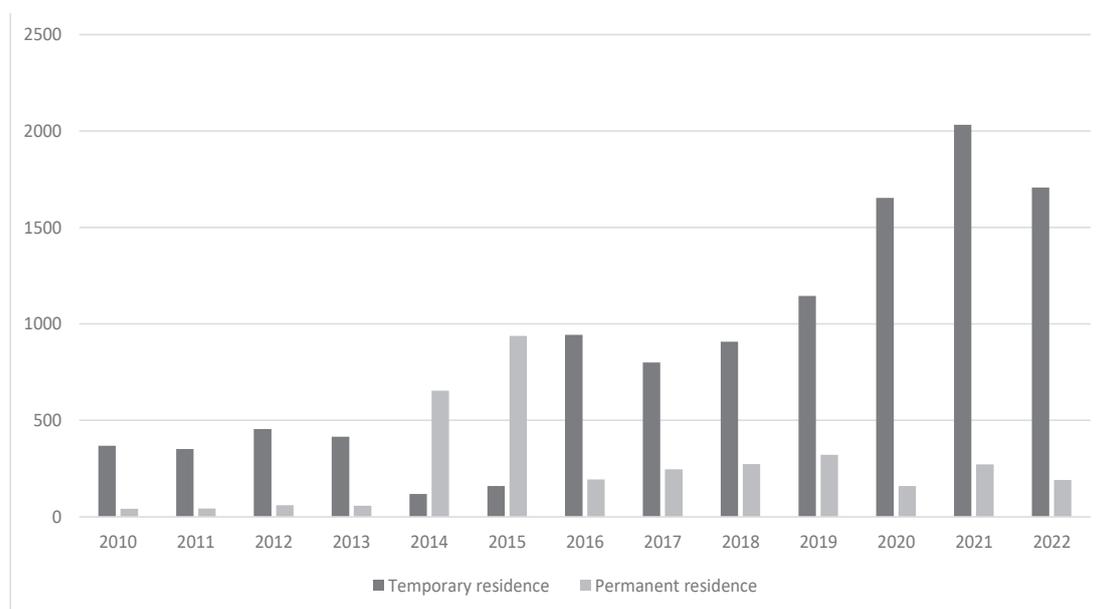
Introduction

The UN data shows that the number of Ukrainians living abroad has been increasing steadily since 1990 (United Nations, 2022)¹. The European Migration Network Report shows that Poland is a culturally, linguistically

¹ These estimates show that in the first years of independence, Poland was the second most important country, following Russia, where Ukrainians migrated.

and economically attractive country for Ukrainians (Wrona, 2019). For many years, Poland has also been of interest to young Ukrainians, who were the largest group of foreigners among students, accounting for more than half of all foreigners (Bobryk, 2019). With the influx of migrants from Ukraine to our country, the number of school-age children of this nationality is also increasing. The largest number of migrants from Ukraine resides in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, where the largest number of children subject to compulsory education live.

Chart 1. The number of positive decisions of the Governor of Mazovia Province concerning permanent and temporary residence of children aged 6-18 in Poland



Source: own compilation based on data from <https://migracje.gov.pl/>.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has set in motion a huge scale of displacement that has also largely affected children and young people. Catherine Rusell, UNICEF Executive Director, points out that „the war has resulted in one of the fastest large-scale displacements of children since World War II” (UNICEF, 2022).

The armed conflict has changed the scale of this phenomenon. Until now, Ukrainian children migrated with their parents, whose decisions were dictated by the desire to raise the family’s economic standard. The current situation has necessitated a change in the approach of the authorities and regulations enforcing or exempting Ukrainian children from compulsory education. Some children and young people arriving in Poland continue their education at their home institution via the Internet, some attend Polish schools while studying online at a school based in Ukraine, and some attend

solely a Polish school. Decisions regarding the choice of the educational path are dictated by the plans of these children's parents related to the current choice of a place to live. As the current armed conflict is prolonged and the children benefiting from online learning at their home institution have no guarantee of its continuation², it is expected that the percentage of Ukrainian children in Polish schools will increase starting from the next school year. At a time when young people and adults in refugee-hosting countries are struggling with the stress of the pandemic and the fear of an escalation of the conflict, caregivers and teachers will need to help children and young people feel safe, to guarantee their sustainable development.

According to the EU estimates, almost half of those fleeing Ukraine are actually school-age children (An official website of the European Union, 2022). In March 2022, 65,000 pupils were enrolled in Polish schools (Czarnek: Do polskich..., 2022). For children affected by the atrocities of war, education is crucial. It also has a far-reaching impact not only on individuals but also on societies as a whole, including the societies hosting refugees, the societies in which they live, and to which they also contribute. The way in which refugees interact in the host country is determined both by the policies of the host country and by the individuals of the society concerned as well as the refugees themselves, depending on which strategy in the relationship is more useful and satisfying to them.

Modes of interaction

Migration can result in many problems which are the product of a dialogue between countries with different traditions and values, but it can also be a source of opportunities, both for individuals and societies. John Berry distinguished four strategies for acculturation, which is understood as a process of psychological and cultural change resulting from intercultural contact, whereby individuals adapt to life in a new environment (Berry, 2005). Berry's model, developed in the 1970s, points to two independent dimensions: *participation*, in which relationships with other individuals or groups in the society are seen as valuable and are thus sought out and nurtured, and *maintenance*, in which immigrants take their cultural identity and customs into account and find them valuable enough to maintain in the host

² Information obtained from parents of children who have been in Poland since 24 February and have completed their online education in the 2021/22 school year at their home school. Ukrainian school teachers informed parents that due to the escalation of hostilities, the functioning of the school may be hampered or even impossible.

society (Berry, 1997). These dimensions give rise to different acculturation strategies, depending on the approach to the process, which identifies four possible options:

- integration: meaning the adoption of the host culture and the preservation of one's own cultural heritage,
- assimilation: meaning the adoption of the host culture and the rejection of one's own cultural heritage,
- marginalisation meaning the rejection of both the host culture and one's own cultural heritage,
- separation: meaning the rejection of the host culture and the preservation of one's own cultural heritage.

Regardless of the choice of strategy, the most preferred option is to integrate (Neto, 2002);Roccas, Horenczyk and Schwartz, 2000). Berry points out that integration can only be freely chosen and effectively implemented by non-dominant groups if the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity (1991;2005). As integration is based on mutual accommodation and the acceptance of cultural distinctiveness, the dominant group must be open to adapting state institutions, including educational institutions, to meet the needs of all groups living side by side. Research shows that integration has the most positive impact on the mental health of migrants (Choy, Arunachalam, Gupta, Taylor and Lee, 2021) and, therefore, is the most desirable strategy. Unlike integration, assimilation is largely a one-way process in which the receiving society 'absorbs' new members and, due to the rejection of their own distinctiveness both culturally and linguistically, can trigger acculturative stresses (Berry, 2006).

The migrant's language skills and language use regarding the language of the host country reflect to some extent the acculturation strategy used. A study in Germany shows that migrants who spoke mainly the language of the host country were assimilated, those who spoke both their mother tongue and the language of the host country were integrated, those who spoke more of their mother tongue were segregated, while poor skills in both languages were equivalent to marginalisation (Trebbe, 2007). Migrants who accept both cultures are more likely to integrate, whereas those who accept the culture of the host country while rejecting their own culture undergo a process of assimilation (Berry, 2006).

The model proposed by Berry is widely accepted, maintained and developed and, therefore, forms the basis for this discussion³. Starting from an overview of legal solutions and the network of Ukrainian school facilities, including references to regulations related to the influx of refugees from Ukraine after the outbreak of hostilities, an analysis of the process of acculturation of Ukrainian children in Polish schools as assessed by their parents was carried out based on semi-structured interviews with 11 parents of school-age children⁴.

Compulsory schooling

Under Article 35 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, „1. The Republic of Poland shall ensure Polish citizens belonging to national and ethnic minorities the freedom to maintain and develop their own language, preserve customs and traditions and develop their own culture. (2) National and ethnic minorities have the right to establish their own educational institutions...” (Journal of Laws 1997 No. 78, item 483). The issue of national minorities is also regulated by the Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and the regional language, which, with regard to educational issues, indicates the realisation of constitutional rights „in the manner specified in the Act of 7 September 1991 on the educational system” (Journal of Laws 2005 No. 17 item 141, Article 17).

In Poland, there is compulsory education in Poland until the age of 18. Pursuant to Article 165 of the Education Law, non-Polish nationals subject to compulsory education who do not know the Polish language or know it at an insufficient level are entitled to additional free education in the Polish language. All children aged 7-18 who arrive from abroad may benefit from education in public schools on the same basis as Polish children. Pupils whose parents make a declaration of fulfilment of this obligation in another country are exempted from the obligation to study. „Children and pupils who are citizens of Ukraine, who have entered the territory of the Republic of Poland legally in the period from 24 February 2022 and who receive education in a kindergarten or school operating in the Ukrainian educational

³ Despite the different perspectives modelled on Berry’s model, they all recognise that members of the host society can shape to a large extent the acculturation attitudes and strategies of the ‘received’ claiming that acculturation attitudes are the result of interaction. Examples include studies by Piontkowski, Rohmann and Florack (2002); Zagefka and Brown (2002).

⁴ All study participants consented to be interviewed. The participants were purposively sampled, 4 people refused to participate in the study.

system using methods and techniques of distance education, are not subject to compulsory one-year preschool preparation, compulsory schooling or compulsory education, within the meaning of the Act - Educational Law.” (Portal Oświatowy, 2022). It should be added that the school is in no way entitled to check the participation in remote classes at a Ukrainian school, thus many students attending a Polish school simultaneously participate in online classes at their home institution.

There are several institutions with the Ukrainian language of instruction in the Republic of Poland: The Complex of Schools with the Ukrainian Language in Górowo Iławieckie (<https://szkolazdumka.pl/>) Łesia Ukrainka Primary School No. 8 with the Ukrainian Language of Teaching in Bartoszyce (<https://www.lesiabart.pl/>) T. Shevchenko Primary School No. 2 in Biały Bór (<http://sp2bbor.eu>); Bohdan Igor Antonych General Secondary School Complex No. 4 in Legnica (<http://zso4legnica.pl/page/40/>). Almost all subjects, except Polish and History, are taught in Ukrainian, which is the mother tongue of most pupils.

The influx of children and young people from Ukraine has not resulted in a spectacular development of the existing network of Ukrainian educational institutions in Poland, their development not being the subject of this discussion. The functioning establishments have, of course, responded to the refugees’ demand in this respect by creating additional groups⁵, but there have been no initiatives by Ukrainian communities residing in the Republic of Poland for a long time to establish new institutions. According to data as of April 2022, „there were almost 180,000 refugees in Polish schools, with only about 1,500 in institutions implementing the Ukrainian curriculum“ (Nowosielska and Otto-Duszczuk, 2022).

The Ministry of Education and Science (MEiN) does not include the opening of Ukrainian schools in Poland in its plans, due to staff and financial shortages (Żurek, 2022). Those that have been established were created through grassroots activities⁶. The MEiN’s response to this situation was the regulation amending the provisions on the detailed organisation of public schools and kindergartens (Journal of Laws 2022 item 566) on the basis of

⁵ For example: a school in Bartoszyce admitted 50 persons.

⁶ A Ukrainian school in Krakow (2022) and the Warsaw Ukrainian School have been established. The ESUA operates on an extracurricular basis - students are assigned to several schools in Dawidów (Lviv Oblast) and study in Warsaw, stationary, under the supervision of Ukrainian educators ([htt3](http://3))

which school principals were allowed to admit children from Ukraine⁷. Additional Polish language classes were organised in schools⁸, and Ukrainian children participated in lessons on the same basis as Polish children.

International and European law establishes the right to equality before the law, but there is no mention of the right to integrate into another country. Therefore, the 'received' are very often exposed to forced assimilation at the hands of the host country. Indeed, there are no legal apparatuses to protect them from attempts at assimilation, which are very often fuelled by xenophobia, so the fate of these people is left to the discretion and ethos of the host country and its citizens.

Acculturation in the school environment

Individuals begin the acculturation process 'equipped' with socially and demographically determined personal characteristics. Undoubtedly, the age of a person influences the process. The earlier the acculturation process begins, the smoother it goes (Breiser et al., 1988). The school is an environment that has a great influence on the acculturation process (Makarova, 2019). It is there that relationships are built between members of the hosting and hosted societies. Everyday intergroup contact plays a key role in the formation of attitudes in terms of the prejudices and acculturation preferences that students develop.

Research shows that the quality of intergroup contacts in the school context has a significant impact on the formation of attitudes and behaviours toward members of groups to which one does not belong. Moreover, attitudes formed at school largely determine the quality of relationships between members of different groups in the future (Titzmann and Jugert, 2015).

⁷ Under this amendment, in the 2021/2022 school year, the number of children in a kindergarten division functioning in a primary school could be increased by up to three children who are citizens of Ukraine. In grades 1-3 of primary schools, the number of children in a branch could be increased by no more than four pupils. In a branch of grades 1,2 or 3 of a primary school functioning with an increased number of pupils, when the number of pupils is 26, an additional three children could be admitted, and when there are 27 children in the branch, no more than two pupils from Ukraine could be admitted.

⁸ Pursuant to Article 165(7) of the Act of 14.12.2016. - Education Law, „non-Polish nationals subject to compulsory education who do not know the Polish language or know it at a level insufficient to benefit from education have the right to additional, free of charge, Polish language education, which is organised by the authority that runs the school.” (Journal of Laws 2021.1082).

There are no special systemic solutions in Polish education aimed at activities for migrant children and youth. The aforementioned right to additional, free-of-charge learning of the Polish language was in practice realised in a negligible part, as it was connected with the necessity to apply to the leading authority for the allocation of these hours. The situation changed somewhat after 24.02.2022 due to the scale of the phenomenon faced by educational institutions, but this change resulted from the search for solutions by teachers themselves rather than any systemic changes.

The implementation of the Polish core curriculum, obtaining promotion to the next grades, passing the eighth-grade and matriculation examinations in Polish are clear indications of the assimilation policy pursued with respect to Ukrainian pupils. Moreover, teachers who treat the refugees' children in a concessionary manner, setting lower requirements for them as a result of their understanding of the situation, indirectly contribute to the discrimination of Polish pupils. Such a situation, as well as the extent of social assistance provided to Ukrainians, is met with incomprehension by a growing number of Polish parents and may become a source of conflict in the future.

The aim of the study was to find the acculturation strategy adopted by parents of refugee children, thus also indirectly by the children themselves, and to try to address the question of which of these strategies in their opinion is implemented in Polish educational institutions and which is preferred by them. Parents were recruited until data saturation was reached, using the following inclusion criteria: coming to Poland from Ukraine, being a parent of a school-age child/children. Respondents included 9 women and 2 men⁹, with a mean age of 29 for women and 47 for men.

Survey participants were asked to define the terms integration and assimilation. From the content analysis of the statements, it is clear that the respondents do not distinguish between these terms. Most often they use the word adaptation when describing the strategy adopted, which, according to Piaget's theory, refers to assimilation, which is part of adaptation (Miller, 2011). The description of the school activities appears to focus on helping the children to adapt as quickly as possible to the conditions of the class group and to meet the requirements of the assessment system, which also

⁹ One of the men came to Poland before the outbreak of war for work purposes and as a result of the armed conflict the rest of the family joined him, the other crossed the border on 24.02.2022 as the father of a large family and was, therefore, not subject to the ban on leaving.

indicates the assimilation activities of the school. Undoubtedly, noteworthy are the statements emphasising the teachers' great commitment to helping the children and their families, each time summarised with statements pointing to the aim of rapid assimilation of Ukrainian and Polish children.

From the statements of respondents arriving in Poland after 24.02.2022, it appears that due to the prolonged war they are prepared for a long-term stay in Poland and indicate that it is necessary for their children, who may ultimately want to stay here permanently, to acquire language skills as soon as possible. The acquisition of language skills was also a key factor for parents whose children have been living in Poland for several years. Today, one cannot see anything in the communication by these children that would indicate that they are not autochthones. The ability to speak Polish, a very good skill - as emphasised by the parents - gives the children themselves a sense of „being at home” and increases their chances on the future labour market. The statements of the respondents testify that in the case of children who came to Poland after the war started, at the beginning of their school journey, it was possible to speak of integration with regard to the fact that they were not just lonely individuals in the school environment, but could gather in a group of children with the same background and experiences. The number of Ukrainian children being currently educated in Polish schools is partly conducive to the preservation of separateness, with respondents clearly indicating that they expect their children to speak only Polish at school, to the best of their ability, even when communicating with siblings attending a different class.

The fact that both the actions of the respondents and the actions of the school indicate a choice of assimilation strategy is also evidenced by the question of attitudes towards participation in religious education lessons implemented in educational institutions. All respondents declared their affiliation with the Orthodox Church¹⁰ but only two of them (a married couple) made a statement to the school that their children would not attend school catechesis. The remaining respondents believe that it is a better choice at school not to demonstrate their dissent, even when both parents and children attend services in churches located within the administrative structure of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

Research shows that people's acculturation strategy may differ in different areas of life, as exemplified by preserving/cultivating one's own culture

¹⁰ There are currently three Orthodox Churches in Ukraine. The Orthodox Church in Poland is autocephalous.

in their private space while integrating or assimilating into the culture of the host country in the public space (Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver, 2004). This seems to be the strategy adopted by the respondents, as they expect their children to be fully assimilated at school on the one hand and to nurture their mother tongue, traditions, and culture in the home environment, on the other hand. The walls of the home/apartment seem to be the boundary beyond which their attitude changes completely. Of course, given the spontaneity of the children, it is difficult to expect them to fully comply with the requirements of their parents, but the bluntness with which they adapt to the new situation will undoubtedly allow them to assimilate into the culture of the host country in the public space in a short time.

The activities of Polish educational institutions for the next school year will continue to be implemented in the spirit of assimilation, focusing on supporting the rapid attainment of a level of language proficiency that allows the implementation of the core curriculum¹¹. The Ministry of Education has also retained the solution to increase the size of a kindergarten division and a division of grades 1-3 of a primary school by children or pupils who are citizens of Ukraine (Nowelizacja rozporządzenia..., 2022), which confirms the lack of actions aimed at creating establishments dedicated to Ukrainian children. Given the scale of the phenomenon and further projections of the increase in the number of Ukrainian children in Polish schools, the conditions of the assimilation process of Ukrainian children in public schools in Poland require further in-depth exploration.

Summary

Approaches to dealing with the challenges posed by the influx of Ukrainian children in Polish schools still seem to be rooted in the classic assimilation model. School facilities are mainly geared toward helping them to quickly acquire language skills and adapt to educational requirements. As a result of the influx of large numbers of Ukrainian children, the question of accommodating the additional diversity they bring to the school environment seems to be of marginal importance. Thus, we cannot speak of integration but of assimilation. The difference between integration and assimilation is

¹¹ With regard to the school year 2022/2023, the provisions on additional Polish language classes referred to in § 17(1) of the Regulation of 23 August 2017 have been updated. For pupils who are citizens of Ukraine, these classes shall be conducted individually or in groups of no more than 15 pupils, at a level that allows them to master the Polish language to a degree that enables them to participate in compulsory educational classes, not less than 6 hours of instruction per week.

significant. Blending into the local culture means losing a distinct cultural identity, whereas integration policy promotes multiculturalism and encourages the exchange of cultural values between two societies. Integration is the preferred course of action because it allows a reciprocal relationship between refugees and the host society, which ultimately leads to successful integration in the future.

Considering the attitudes of the parents of the children who came to Poland for work or to flee from war, it should be emphasised that it is they themselves, due to the prolonged conflict and the prospect of longer residence in our country, who strive to assimilate as quickly as possible, with a simultaneous attitude of separation within the home environment or the group of compatriots. Globalisation has significantly changed the circumstances in which migrants live, allowing them to maintain stronger ties with their country of origin, through mass media, the Internet, or cheaper telephone connections. As a result of this, migrants have a „better space” to maintain belonging to their home country and are less likely to feel the pressure to assimilate, unless they themselves adopt such a strategy.

Education is undoubtedly crucial to helping children integrate and make new friends in the host society. School is the best place for children, both for education and to help them integrate. Ukrainian children and young people have been, are now, and will continue to be a diverse and important demographic in our country. It seems necessary to develop a model for their integration aimed at a positive adaptation framework that seeks to understand both the risks and the richness of this community.

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