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CHILDREN WITH MIGRATION BACKGROUNDS IN POLISH SCHOOLS – PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will reconsider the problems and challenges of children with migration background in Polish schools. The author refers to his own studies conducted as a part of the MiCreate project, supplemented by previous academic research in order to find the tools and solutions that could support the integration of migrant children, aid their wellbeing and empower them in their new environment. Legal aspects of the Polish educational system are described in the beginning in order to understand the background for the integration practices. Particular emphasis is placed on the intercultural competences of teachers and the development of the profession of intercultural assistants.

Keywords: interculturalism, education, migrant children, teaching, diversity, social work

BAMBINI CON ESPERIENZA DI MIGRAZIONE NELLE SCUOLE POLACCHE – PROBLEMI E SFIDE

SINTESI

Il contributo tratta dei problemi e delle sfide dei bambini con esperienza di migrazione nelle scuole polacche. L'autore fa riferimento ai propri studi condotti nell'ambito del progetto MiCreate, integrati da precedenti ricerche accademiche, al fine di identificare gli strumenti e le soluzioni in grado di supportare l'integrazione di bambini migranti, favorire il loro benessere e responsabilizzarli nel loro nuovo ambiente. Gli aspetti giuridici del sistema di istruzione polacco sono descritti all'inizio per consentire la comprensione dello sfondo su cui sono basate le pratiche di integrazione. Un'enfasi particolare viene posta sulle competenze interculturali degli insegnanti e sullo sviluppo della professione degli assistenti interculturali.

Parole chiave: interculturalità, istruzione, bambini migranti, insegnamento, diversità, lavoro sociale

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

When discussing the problems and challenges faced by children with a migration background in the schooling system of one's own country, we need to reconsider several separate issues that are only formally interlinked. Some refer to sociological or legal definitions describing such children: the latter consider their functioning in educational systems and surrounding environments, the other is attached to services provided to such children or people and institutions empowering or disempowering them. This is particularly important as UNESCO guidelines on Intercultural Education require each country to respect a student's cultural identity through the provision of a culturally adequate education, enabling each student access to cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in a society in a manner contributing to building respect, understanding and solidarity between people from various ethnic, social, religious or national groups (UNESCO, 2015, 30). Such guidelines require from governments to create policies which will affect legal definitions, sociological constructions used to describe children with migration background, transform the environment and services to be consistent with the UNESCO instructions. Education itself is seen as a social capital building factor, a creator of equal chances on the labor market, an important indicator of reducing differences in accessing social goods and equalizing development opportunities (Adams & Kirova, 2007). In Poland, it is widely accepted that despite a declared equality in the access to education, children with a migration background face multiple problems in schools (Butarewicz-Głowacka, 2015, 103–104).

This article will reconsider several problems and challenges based on existing research as well as our own research conducted within the MiCreate¹ project. This research was divided into two stages. The project team first spoke with 14 experts and stakeholders, professionally active in the field of migration and integration. Some were teachers, some employed by government in educational institutions and some represented the non-governmental organizations. Interviewees were selected according to their professional practice, knowledge and experience to represent the whole spectrum of persons

and institutions engaged in the process of children's integration in Polish school's environment. Then the fifteen different schools countrywide were selected in order to assess the situation of the migrant children there. Schools were selected for the study to represent all types of establishments from large metropolitan ones to those located in small village far from any large city. In each of them a structured interview had been made with a person who has the best knowledge on the relations between local and migrant children. Six schools in the Krakow's area were then selected for the in depth studies. Six interviews per school were conducted with teachers, psychologists, administrative staff and other employees. Some group were then invited to focus groups to speak about perception of the diversity and multiculturalism in the school environment as well as strengths and weaknesses, good practices and other ideas about integration. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed.

ARE CHILDREN WITH A MIGRATION BACKGROUND LEGALLY RECOGNIZED?

In legal terms there are three types of inhabitants in Poland: people holding Polish citizenship and people not holding Polish citizenship that are then dividing into UE/EEA/Swiss citizens and third country nationals. Migratory status or experiences are not relevant for this definition. In the regulations adopted at the level of the Ministry of Education, more detailed categories of students can be distinguished. Poland singles out non-Polish students and Polish students who were receiving education in schools as part of other countries' educational systems. This allows the sorting of those Polish citizens who were not part of Polish schooling and being born abroad or spending certain time there receiving a foreign education. This is a specific category of children with a migration background, often overlooked by educational systems and discriminated against in access to fair and equal education. As those children hold Polish citizenship, they are expected to know the Polish language and culture which is often not the case. Even if their language proficiency is communicative enough to have an effortless conversation, most will not know the language of instruction, which is crucial to follow the curriculum and obtain educational acknowledgment (Lipińska & Seretny, 2018, 88–89).

1 MiCREATE – Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe is an international project financed by the EU Commission under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (Grant Number 822664). It is led by the Slovenian ZRS Koper academic institute in partnership with fourteen other academic institutions and organizations. Its overall objective is to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centered approach to the integration of migrant children at the level of education and policy. Stemming from the need to revisit existing integration policies, the research project aims at a comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes of migrant children in order empower them.

Another group that is overlooked by the system are UE/EEA/Swiss citizens who, in theory, have the same rights as Polish citizens. With a lack of state-supported integration programs, migrant children of this category cannot benefit from integration programs implemented by voivodships² such as AMIF funds (Asylum, Migration and Integration Funds). Presently in Poland, this is the major fund that delivers additional language classes, compensatory lessons to migrant children and organizing integration activities between third country nationals and local children. The situation of migrant children is complex both in legal terms and in school practice, revealing several spheres of potential inequalities.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

The most important discriminatory factor in this regard is obviously language proficiency. Those who speak Polish fluently are generally well integrated into the system, but those who are not face trouble in school including the need to repeat a whole year, lower achievements and general educational failure. The correct classification of a child and the adaptation of a useful definition is therefore extremely important in order to connect a child in need (with a migration background) to the services available within the social policy system.

Many scholars and social activists in Poland are warning that the imperfect inclusive solutions already present (or completely absent) in the educational system, especially in light of the declared state of epidemic, proclaimed in Poland in March 2020 and still in force in June 2020, has deteriorated the situation of children with special educational needs and has once again limited their access to a fair and equal education (Migrant Info Point, 2020). This reveals the structural problem of the education of children with migration backgrounds in Polish schools.

In Poland, every child between the ages of 7 and 18 has both the right and an obligation to attend school. It is legally required for them to complete eight years of education, which means finishing primary school. After the 2016 school reform, there are no longer middle schools in Poland and the secondary stage of education include four-year

lyceums, five-year technical schools and two-stage vocational schools. Primary schools' enrollment are assigned to territorial areas. This creates the first structural problem. Children are enrolled into schools located in the area of their domicile. As Poland does not have typical migration districts in cities most children with a migration background are dispersed between many schools. They do not build visible school communities as their presence is usually below 5% of overall school communities. In such circumstances, the integration of the child in the classroom is dependent on the teacher's ability to notice such a child and engage it in classroom activities.

We learned, from interviews³ with teachers and school representatives within the MiCreate project, that many teachers consciously or unconsciously do not acknowledge the differing needs of children with a migration background. In the first case equal treatment is wrongfully understood as the supposition not to distinguish any child in the school despite his/her uniqueness or group belonging. This touched upon the issue related to the process of individualization of teaching. In large classes, overwhelmed by the curriculum imperative, teachers once again need to choose whether to engage or ignore a child with a migration background. This interrupts the two-way integration process. Our MiCreate findings showed that once a teacher is focusing on migration children, he or she usually neglects local children causing inter-peer strain. On the other hand, there are also teachers who ignore migrant children which led to isolation and problems with keeping up in learning. These findings are coherent with earlier research (Januszewska, 2015; Butarowicz-Głowacka, 2015; Nazaruk, 2016). In the current state of epidemic, the individualization of work is even harder as online teaching is shorter and more focused on task assignment and knowledge transmission. It was noticed by our interviewees from educational communities and non-governmental organizations that migrant children have fewer possibilities to engage in the process of online learning and are not able to ask additional questions or obtain clarification needed to understand the learning material. The support of assistants is also limited. These findings overlap with the general problems of online teaching such

2 Poland's 'voivodship' (pl. *województwo*) is the largest unit of local governance in Poland. Usually it covers a single or several regions. There are currently sixteen voivodships in Poland. Governance has a dual structure. Migration issues are covered by a central governmental representative in the region.

3 In MiCreate project, Work Package 3 and Work Package 4 were devoted to examine Reception Communities and School Communities in the following countries: Austria, Denmark, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom. In each country scholars undertook numerous interviews with stakeholders – experts from governmental and non-governmental institutions working with children with a migration background (WP3). In the next stage of the project, interviews and focus groups with teachers and other school staff were organized. Each country's team selected six schools, representative of the state, for in-depth studies and nine more schools for more general interviews. Collections of the interviews enabled the preparation of six national reports on different aspects of migrant children functioning in school and local communities.

as lack of equipment, limitation of school hours, the unclear methodology of teaching and greater parental burden which is impossible to bear (Librus, 2020, 3–16).

Nevertheless, in both educational scenarios it should be the chief responsibility of principals and the relevant performance assessment institutions to assign children with a migration background to the adequate classroom and grade/year, as well as an empowering one, enabling the fastest possible adaptation to a new environment. As Entorf and Lauk argue, the system of early differentiation by skill level has a negative impact on the school performance of children who come to school with language and social deficits, a high proportion of whom come from families with a migration background (Entorf & Lauk, 2008, 634). Polish rules of enrollment relying on domicile seems to prevent such differentiation as far as the effect of migrant ghettoization does not appear. There is however no legally binding solution to the problem of lowering the year/grade during the enrollment process created by the assessment of skills. This process is driven by language performance and most assessment institutions and principals prefer to assign a child to a 'lower' classroom than the actual age of the child fearing issues with curriculum understanding, including differences in various European systems. The problem here is legal regulation in educational law which allows discretionally decision of headmasters and school boards on this matter. It means that each of nearly twenty four thousand Polish schools may have different approach to assign migrant children to certain classes. The only merit ground is documentation from other educational systems, interview, parent's opinion and tests of abilities. Those tests are not synchronized by the government and are also individual for each school.

Teachers interviewed by us in the MiCreate project openly claimed that curriculums in the United Kingdom or United States are less demanding to children of certain grades, especially in mathematics and the natural sciences. There are however other structural factors that may affect the integration opportunities of migrant children. One is school overcrowding. Although year after year the number of students are dropping, the 2016 reform which liquidated middle schools caused the overburdening of secondary schools in the 2019/2020 school year due to an influx of students. This affected the process of supervision over the school performance of individual students as there were simply too many to allot time for individual work or counseling. Thus, school achievements are dependant on parents' ability to support their child in his/her learning. As previously mentioned, regardless of the

methodology used during online teaching, many migrant parents have real trouble controlling their child's progress as they are unable to communicate with the school or use the relevant applications or software necessary for online learning. The language barrier is key here and this also revealed that in many Polish schools, students with a migration background often become unwilling translators in the relations between parents and school staff. This is never adequate as there are many distortions in the translation process, not only connected to different meanings of certain words in other languages but also related to the emotional and psychological input of the conversation (García-Sánchez, Orellana & Hopkins, 2011, 148–149). In Poland, many teachers who may have previously learned some basic Russian during their own education are able to use this language as a poor man's *lingua franca* and to some extent control what is being said during teacher-parent conferences whenever students serve as translators. This might be to some extent perceived as great asset as Polish schools are dominated by Russian/Ukrainian/Belarussian speaking students. These three groups totals approximately 80-85 per cent of the whole population of foreign children. The other larger groups (bellow 500) are Vietnamese, German, Bulgarian, French, Chinese and South Korean. Nevertheless the quality of such communication is often dependent on family relations, with the parental effect on schooling performance being reinforced by particularly low intergenerational educational transmission (Entorf & Lauk, 2008, 634).

At the beginning of this century, Marcus and Sanders-Reio reported that many scholars saw a positive attachment of the child to his family and peers as a prerequisite of higher school performance. Detachment caused by family structure irregularities or emotional dissonance were predictors of school failure (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001, 429–430). As Gawlicz is reporting, many Polish scholars, since the beginning of migration studies in Poland, have confirmed that migrant children are neglected, stigmatized and sometimes abused both by teachers and their peers (Gawlicz, 2015, 15–26). The situation is much better in large cities where most integration programs have been introduced. Nevertheless, from the structural perspective the anticipation of improvement is undermined by a lack of anti-discrimination education, and a lack of civic education in Polish schools (Abramowicz, 2011). The obligation to introduce such threads in Polish education took effect for a short period after 2015. As found in a report prepared for the MiCreate project (Bulandra & Kościółek, 2019a, 57), this requirement (until its abolition by the new government in 2017) had never been operationalized or trans-

ferred into the teaching program framework. Over the years and despite the lack of direct instruments, the very fact that this was found in the Education Act allowed some teachers and non-governmental organizations to introduce elements of intercultural teaching into particular subjects or as independent workshops and training sessions for children. However, this came to an end with a shift in government in 2015 due to the reluctance of principals to allow extra-curricular subjects to be taught by external institutions that were not state-approved, as well as pressures from certain right-wing organizations who see anti-discrimination education as threat to traditional, Christian values.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS OF INTEGRATION

Here comes the question about the facilitating and impeding factors in the school environment. Despite reported singular incidents, most migrant children are largely accepted in their local communities in Poland. These incidents, however, are harmful and sometimes even dangerous. Open racial or xenophobic bias is rare, but racial prejudice is often preserved in local children's attitudes due to recent changes in the state's narration on notion such as patriotism, nation, national identity and the *suchlike*. When the author spoke with migration experts in the MiCreate project, it was highlighted that any attempt to awaken national pride in Polish people may forge an acceptance of discrimination towards migrant children as Polish children have started to feel superior over their peers from different nations and are building their exceptionalism on exclusion (Bulandra & Kościółek, 2019b, 40–41). The prevention of such bias is a major challenge in contemporary Polish schools. These processes, especially if undertaken against the symbolic and systemic narration of the educational authorities, require courage but also the high intercultural competences of teachers. This is particularly important as the numbers of migrant children attending Polish schools year on year is gradually on the rise, in fact, this increase has been rapid most recently. For many years research undertaken among teachers showed that they lack the competences to teach in an intercultural environment and feel lost when approaching a child with a different cultural background (Błeszyńska, 2010, 50–79). However, our interviews with teachers showed the contrary. This might be however local effect as Krakow did a lot in past few years to prepare teachers to educate children in diverse environment. In our research it was also important

to assess the situation in the schools which are intercultural, so the results did not represent the average Krakow's teachers.

During the MiCreate project, we spoke with teachers with advanced teaching experience who attended different training sessions years before the interviews. At the beginning of the century, training sessions focused on migratory issues were extremely popular and teachers often attended them. As most of these focused on the development of soft competences, teachers did not feel the further need to expand on them further. The approach of teachers to development of their intercultural knowledge is mixed, however, they scored low on the list of priorities in general professional development (Hernik et al., 2013, 24). This was also confirmed in preliminary research recently undertaken by Pamuła-Behrens and Szymańska (Bulandra et al., 2019, 33–57). It revealed that teachers prize their effectiveness in working with migrant children and their parents lower than educators⁴ and school psychologists do. This refers to teaching performance, conflict resolution and the motivation of students for learning, but also teaching Polish as a foreign language which was the weakest part of teachers' competences. Researchers who knew that most respondents took part in different intercultural training sessions or studies felt concerned with the low estimation of teaching effectiveness among teachers. Although teachers declared their readiness for an individual approach to children with a migration background, they seem to concentrate on the deficits of such children (lowering expectations) rather than their capabilities. However, they are ready to learn new methods of teaching and gain academic knowledge in order to change their approach to implement modern integration tools. They also prize high their intercultural competences and openness to otherness (Bulandra et al., 2019, 43–50).

The declaration of the necessity to raise intercultural competences does not come, however, with a readiness to take part in training or studies in this field. There are numerous opportunities to sign up for post-graduate studies focused on work in an intercultural environment. Such studies are also co-financed by local governments. For example, in Kraków teachers can apply for a reimbursement of 85% of the costs of such studies. However, for the past two years such studies have not been provided in Kraków universities due to a lack of willing participants. The reason for this is unclear and has never been examined well in the research. Our interviews showed that teachers are overwhelmed

⁴ Educator in Poland is a teacher that supports pedagogically school, but is not teaching any subject or teacher who is supervising class in the school (can teach particular subject but may not).

with the amount of regular teaching they have and have little spare time for such studies, so there is a general lack of interest to gain only soft competences. If this were not the case, studies or training sessions for teaching Polish as a foreign language might become very popular and in most schools that accept migrant children teachers of Polish might gain such competences. This refers, however, only to teachers of Polish, rarely other humanities subjects.

The low intercultural competences of teachers, contradicting the general openness and will to help migrant children makes integration efforts intuitive and circumstantial. It leads also to multiple wrongdoings in the approach to the adaptation of children with migration backgrounds in schools. The first might be the 'exoticizing' of children with a migration background. The otherness is perceived here through an attachment to folk culture rather than a more complex cultural background. Children with a migration background are expected to share these types of cultural patterns as part of integration activities. Such an approach is increasingly criticized by contemporary scholars (Gorski, 2008, 522). Mecheril, based on his German research, argues that some integration practices might even construct "the other" as cultural differences are embossed; cherishing one's primal identity is imposed as an obligation during school events as part of a "made up" integration process (Kindler, 2008, 68). Teachers overlook the real needs of children, their own perception of cultural identity or sometimes force them to identify with a previous culture regardless of a child's will. Sometimes they also make cultural, ethnic or racial differences relevant when they are in fact irrelevant (Ahlund & Jonsson, 2016, 168–169; Moskal & North, 2017, 110–111). Integration activities, if organized, are extremely superficial concentrating on cooking, dancing, playing folk instruments and singing traditional songs during one-time or annual events and are not followed by a broader recognition of other cultures, history and heritage. The modern dimension of the arriving migrant's country's culture with all its shades is not even mentioned.

The parts of the curriculum that include cultural patterns are predominantly ethnocentric, nationalistic, driven by religious bias and occidental. The achievements of cultures other than European are largely ignored, diminished or even discussed as being European. The picture of minorities and the other arriving culture is stereotypical and superficial (Stowarzyszenie Żydowskie Czulent, 2015; Abramowicz, 2011). Historical events are presented from a solely Polish perspective, often in an antagonistic manner, which is particularly harmful for Ukrainian children, for example. Ukrainians are

held responsible for the Wołyń atrocities that took place during the Second World War between 1942 and 1943 and is perceived by Poland as genocide. This historical event is used to intimidate Ukrainians both in peer and social relations with adults (Tyma, 2019, 11, 27–28).

Little has changed in this area since the research of Kubin and Świerszcz who proved that the effort of teachers was focused on the implementation of curriculum requirements and transference of school knowledge and skills. The acculturation of children with a migration background has not been properly supported despite experiencing many difficulties in the process of finding themselves in a new reality (Kubin & Świerszcz, 2011, 148–149). This does not help integration processes which, when headed by experienced, devoted and competent teachers, could well be introduced in the school environment due to the fact that certain general instructions in educational law oblige educators to teach tolerance and respect for different nations and individuals. Unfortunately, the whole field within the host society's education system has been greatly overlooked.

SERVICES AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN

In its theoretical assumptions, the Polish system of education is built around the concept of inclusiveness. This means that children with different educational needs receive the same education and share classes with peers who do not have such needs. This refers both to children with a migration background, ethnic or national minorities as well children with disabilities or other needs that should be addressed. Scholars call this approach the "one path" model which aims at including children with diverse needs, capabilities, and development pace into the mainstream of education (Bąbka & Nowicka, 2017, 122). Unfortunately in educational practice such inclusiveness becomes problematic. The most important issue refers to in the mainstream of education the language of instruction which in most countries is the official language of the state. In Poland, regardless of proficiency, children are obliged to receive education in the Polish language which creates, as was mentioned previously, a space for discrimination. Children's assets derived from their cultural heritage, knowledge of the world and familiarity with foreign languages (often several) are not used in formal education as a contribution to learning. Poor national language abilities is always treated as a deficit that needs to be offset first. As a result most or all inclusion efforts are focused on language learning, suppressing the child's natural curiosity.

The Polish educational system offers several solutions for children with a migration background to support their education and integration into Polish society. Some, however, are dependent on the decisions of local government and available resources. As in most European countries and also in Poland, the learning of the official language is treated as the most important or even only integration practice. In Poland, non-Polish citizens who are enrolled into schools have the right to additional language classes. Before this takes place, they are classified into certain classes according to a language performance test score which is the cause of the problem of migrant children being assigned to lower classes than would be the case if it was only dependent on age. The nature of this test is not standardized but is determined by each school's teaching council so may differ across the country. Additionally, language classes are free and available from enrollment but only to a limited extent, decided by principals within a range set by the government. There cannot be fewer than two hours per week, but in fact – due to financial constraints – it is often only a meagre two hours. Teachers themselves perceive this as being insufficient to catch up with the rest of the class or actively participate in lessons (Bąbka & Nowicka, 2017, 134). What is more, the classes are not adjusted to the individual needs of the migrant child. These lessons are usually run for groups of migrant children, often differing in age, language proficiency and cultural experience. These factors make the process of effective teaching extremely difficult for language teachers and a waste of the potential of learning for migrant children.

For Polish citizens returning from abroad, such classes are only available for the first twelve months which demonstrates the paternalistic approach to Polishness by the current government, differentiating children on grounds of their nationality. It is culturally expected that Polish parents *per se* will share the language, customs and suchlike of the so-called "patriotic identity" with their children. Such approach is of course wrong and harmful for such children. Polish language classes are not combined with foreign languages classes for Polish children which, in the author's opinion, could benefit peer integration and generally develop the language capabilities of the whole school community.

Another way of supporting children with migration backgrounds is assigning additional classes to them from a given subject based on the decision of particular subject teacher. Once again, this approach seems to be paternalistic as the will and needs of the child might be overlooked by teachers who do not see migrant children as students with special needs. We identified such an approach as quite frequent (Bulandra, Kościółek & Majcher

Legawiec, 2019, 28). Nevertheless, such classes are organized in order to fill gaps arising from curriculum differences between educational systems. What is more, each child is limited in taking such courses to a maximum of five hours a week.

The school may also organize preparatory classes for children with migration backgrounds who are not prepared linguistically to join regular classes. This is a relatively new tool in the Polish educational system, introduced together with the 2017 school reform and not particularly popular as a form of social support for migrant children. There is no official data showing how many of such classes have been organized. Moreover, such classes cannot include more than fifteen students but children of different grades and ages according to schemes set by government can be included. These usually encompass students from three different school years matched by age and levels of education. The most problematic issue in the functioning of such classes is the obligation not only to teach students Polish but also to provide regular subject classes in line with the curriculum in a range of 20-26 hours per week. If there are students from three different years in such a class, the teacher must provide knowledge from three different curriculum sources, which makes an individual approach futile. Learning in preparatory classes is limited only to a single school year, a period too short for many children with a migration background to adapt to the new environment. This creates yet another problem for this institution, and should therefore be reformed.

A recent development in the range of accessible integration tools for migrant children is the possibility of employing cultural assistants within schools. Their role is to help children in the adaptation process within the classroom and school environment. Unfortunately, the only requirement set by the government for such employees is bilingualism and a basic education. The profession is not standardized, there is no clear indication for the requirements of such a role. All that is mentioned is that such a person is an 'aid' for the teacher. It is unclear if an assistant could be a foreigner. Regulations in this regard fall under different interpretations. Cultural assistants are hired as administrative staff in the school even though they function as teachers. Having such a low status means their jobs are not legally protected and their employment status is not stable. Most are hired on short-term contracts for a single school year with the possibility of their contract being terminated once the migrant child under their care has left school, or even during the course of the school year. The support of the assistant is assigned to a certain child who only receives such aid for a twelve-month period. Once again, assistants can help only those children

with migration backgrounds whose language abilities are too low to join regular classes (Bulandra et al., 2019, 62–63). Such restrictions reduce the potential of persons who become assistants, deteriorating integration opportunities for those children who perform well in Polish. Once again, this is yet another visible sign of the limitation of integration activities for gaining national language abilities. Meanwhile teachers interviewed in the MiCreate project put particular emphasis on the increase of tasks assigned to intercultural assistants. They see such individuals as mediators between school staff, peers and families (Bulandra, Kościółek & Majcher Legawiec, 2019, 21). If this is the case, assistants should in fact enjoy the status of social workers, but our respondents claimed that the status of such employees is unclear, their duties are not listed or known to the rest of the staff. It is also hard to find individuals for these positions as people who apply often do not have the expected competences (Bulandra, Kościółek & Majcher Legawiec, 2019, 27).

ARE POLISH SCHOOLS INTERCULTURAL?

As described above, the Polish educational system has created a relatively modern structure of integration institutions and practices, however, its practical implementation has also created numerous problems, limiting its potential for the empowerment of migrant children. The school itself might be perceived as an institution that should interact constantly with the surrounding environment. However, it should be prepared to take up activities within a diverse environment with often contradicting social phenomena, structures and processes, including the ways people think and engage in activities (Smoter, 2016, 53). There is no clear definition which might make a particular school intercultural but it is assumed that even the presence of a single student with a different cultural background makes a change in the educational environment and creates a space for cultural diversity. Nikitorowicz describe this process as a sum of mutual influences and interactions between individuals, groups, institutions, organizations, associations and unions that foster the development of such a person so that this person could become a fully aware and creative member of a family, local and regional community, religious, national, continental, cultural and a global group and be capable of actively building an unique and durable identity (Nikitorowicz, 2003, 934).

In each case, integration processes usually require facilitation. It is not enough to create tools for equality if certain groups cannot benefit from it. Vesting rights to foreigners that are equal to Polish citizens may even obstruct the integration process. This paradox comes from the belief that

the same right warrants the same level of treatment. But such an approach does not consider the special needs of children with a migration background, nor their assets and deficits which require a special approach and additional support. Furthermore, the declaration of equality may release teachers from responsibilities to take care of the migrant child, be interested in their needs or approach them individually whenever possible. As Mucha states, the responsibility for the quality of relations between inferior and superior group is vested in the dominant group. The majority is obliged to be more tolerant and democratic (Mucha, 1999, 13). The current assessment of the author's research team in the MiCreate project demonstrated that nowadays the success of integration depends rather on particular teachers and their intercultural competences than systemic solutions. This was also demonstrated by the previous research of miechowska-Petrovskij (Śmiechowska-Petrovskij, 2017, 16–19). The competence of skills is not the collection of limited elements but are flexible and the subject of ongoing development.

It consists in knowledge, skills and attitudes. Each of these elements relates dynamically to teaching practice, pedagogical experience and the conditions of the profession, including social change. According to Zawadzka, intercultural competences are a set of analytical and strategic skills in contact with foreign nationals. Through knowledge about different cultures and behaviors are culturally driven, and analysis should be free of bias and prejudice, intercultural competence enables sensibility towards cultural differences and changes in attitudes. This broadens the spectrum of possible interpretations and activities in social relations (Zawadzka, 2000, 451). Teachers who gained such competences are much more prepared to work with children with a migration background and are more eager to engage such children in the active educational process even if there is a language barrier. However, no teacher is omnipotent and in the end they are usually overloaded with regular school tasks and are unable to use their intercultural competences to their full extent due to the structural constraints of the educational system. In the author's opinion, the solution to the problem (including also the problem of language barriers and proficiency) is the development of the institution of the cultural assistant. Such a person should be a permanent part of the school community but the role should be seen as more of a social worker, working in an intercultural environment.

A cultural assistant with relevant language abilities and knowledge of different cultures should be an aid to teachers and may also take the role of mediating in contacts between school, parents,

the local environment and the children whom he or she assists. They can also resolve conflicts that may arise in peer relations or any other vertical relations with school staff. The presence of such a person in schools could guarantee the success of the integration process if they are competent and take an active part in the empowerment process of the children with migration backgrounds. Despite this institution being new in Poland, many local governments and school boards are investing in supporting its development. More studies are needed in order to clarify the impact of such an assistant's work on the integration of children with migration

backgrounds, but the first experiences are very much positive and assistants that have already been hired are gaining confidence in their work to help children themselves gain confidence in school and improve school performance (Bulandra, Kościółek & Majcher Legawiec, 2019, 71–94; Lachowicz, 2012, 185–200). This profession should however be standardized, located within the duties of the social services to provide it with some level of stability. It could be the case that their work is key to the real inclusiveness of children with migration backgrounds and preventing their marginalization in the process of education.

OTROCI IZ PRISELJENSKIH OKOLIJ V POLJSKIH ŠOLAH – TEŽAVE IN IZZIVI

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POVZETEK

Namen članka je predstaviti težave in izzive, povezane z navzočnostjo otrok iz priseljenkih okolij v poljskih šolah. Pojav je razmeroma nov in večina pravnih rešitev na tem področju je bila uvedena šele v zadnjih petih letih. Članek je nastal na podlagi več raziskav poljske ekipe projekta MiCreate, ki je del programa za raziskave in inovacije Obzorje 2020, dopolnjujejo pa ga še druge akademske raziskave. Oblikovanje programa glede na aktualne težave in iskanje morebitnih rešitev sta danes v kontekstu razvoja poljskega izobraževalnega sistema izjemno pomembna, saj število otrok, rojenih v tujini, v poljskih šolah naglo narašča. Avtor je na podlagi raziskav in siceršnjega akademskega dela ugotovil, da kljub razmeroma sodobni sistemski ureditvi, ki naj bi olajšala potek integracije, v praksi ta ni povezana s pristojnostmi ustanove, temveč s trudom in predanostjo posameznih učiteljev. Tak sklep napeljuje k temu, da bi morali poseben poudarek nameniti krepitvi medkulturnih kompetenc učiteljev ter razvoju poklica in vloge medkulturnega asistenta.

Ključne besede: medkulturnost, izobraževanje, priseljeni otroci, poučevanje, raznolikost, socialno delo

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