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The Role of Children's Education in Family Decision-Making Strategies among Migrants in Poland

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Introduction

Neoliberal migration theories assume that migration decisions are based largely, if not solely, on economic factors (Sales 2007). Moreover, they presume that family migration is undertaken to maximize the economic opportunities of the main wage earner who is often considered, explicitly or implicitly, to be male (Ryan, Sales 2013). This approach disregards forced migrants and overlooks the role of women and children in the decision-making processes and obfuscates "the underlying social and cultural decision-making processes of family migrants" (Smith 2004: 265).

Family migration involves complex decision-making about leaving, staying, and returning. Factors affecting family decision-making are as numerous as they are diverse. Additionally, family migration requires on-going decision-making since migration is not a singular event that begins with movement and ends with settlement. As Louise Ryan and Rosemary Sales indicate, migration "is an on-going process that may be re-evaluated and re-considered several times over the life-course" (Ryan, Sales 2013: 92)

In this article, I analyze decision-making processes among a diverse group of migrant families residing in Poznań and Wrocław, Poland. The families are diverse in

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the sense that they include families headed by single parents (mainly mothers, but also fathers) and families with two mainly but not exclusively heterosexual parents. In some families, all members share the same ethnic origin, but some include parents who hail from two different countries and have children who were born in yet another country. Several of the families lived in more than one country before coming to Poland. What unites them is the presence of school age children.

Following Louise Ryan and Rosemary Sales (2013), I argue that the presence and the evolving needs of children as well as the stage they reached in their education are key elements in the migration decision-making processes. Furthermore, I posit that education, including educational aspirations, continue to be present in the ongoing decision-making regarding multiple aspects of migrant families' lives. Therefore, in my analysis I go beyond the decision to emigrate or flee armed conflict and focus also on decisions regarding types of schools the children in this study attend; motivations to learn Polish and/or maintain heritage language competency; plans for the future; and family arrangements that facilitate achievement of these plans.

I begin this article with a summary of existing literature on education and migrant decision-making. I continue with remarks on theoretical and methodological considerations. These sections situate my article in the context of existing knowledge, theoretical frameworks used to debate the topic of migration decision-making, and methodological approaches deployed in existing research and in my own study. The main part of the article presents the analysis of empirical findings resulting from ethnographic interviews and participant observation with migrant families currently residing in Poznań and Wrocław. I end the article with some concluding thoughts on the role of education in migration decision-making and the significance of my study. I also suggest topics for further research on this issue.

Existing Knowledge

Research on migrant decision-making has focused on various factors associated with migration aspirations that underlie migrants' choices to migrate (Aslany et al. 2021; Carling 2014; de Haas 2010). Education is one of the many aspects that (some) scholars discuss. However, when education is an element of these analyses, it is usually discussed in terms of the educational background of adult migrants. Following Appadurai (2004), Czaika and colleagues acknowledge that "beyond immediate needs, people's aspirations are further influenced by their personality, socialization, and education, all constituting elements of a personal 'capacity to aspire'" (Czaika et al. 2021: 19), but they too focus solely on education levels of adult migrants.

My interest is in the role of children's education in the decision-making processes of migrating families and the role of the children in contributing to these decisions. Therefore, I will narrow my discussion to that aspect of aspirations and

decision-making processes. Whenever possible, I will highlight studies on family migration, motivated by education, to Poland. In all cases, I write about school age children, i.e., individuals between 7 and 18 years of age, and their parents or legal guardians. In few instances, I mention young adults, mainly recent high school graduates.

Many authors discuss decision-making at the nexus of migration and families, with a particular emphasis on parenting responsibilities. Parenting responsibilities are likely to affect considerations of migration, but they could do so in different ways. On the one hand, children could curtail migration aspirations if going abroad would mean leaving them behind. On the other hand, providing better livelihoods for children is a common motivation for migration. For instance, migration could be used as a strategy for supporting children in the form of remittances that pay for education, or with an aim of raising and educating children abroad (Agadjanian et al. 2008; Carling, Menjívar, Schmalzbauer, 2012).

In a working paper *Migration, Decision Making and Young Families*, Rica Castaneda and Anna Triandafyllidou (2022) provide a comprehensive literature review of publications emphasizing the role of families in the decision-making of young adults, both young people who are single and young families, who migrated as international students. The emphasis here is on familial ties and their role in the decision-making process. The authors highlight the role and viewpoints of the parents of these young adults who support their offspring either through sustaining their study abroad or by providing support to their grown-up children and young grandchildren. These studies are only tangentially related to my interests as they discuss mainly adults who pursue tertiary education.

However, international students can be minor-aged children sent overseas by parents who aspire to western education for their children (Waters 2003, 2005, 2015) or want to circumvent military training at a certain age (Shih 2016). Min Zhou (1998) calls them "parachute kids." These children are often parented transnationally and/or cared for by kin in destination countries (Sun 2014). Researchers have also investigated situations where parents, usually mothers, migrate with the student seeking better education. Tsong and Liu (2008) wrote about "astronaut" families from Taiwan and Hong Kong, while Park and Bae (2009) discussed "goose families" from South Korea. The "astronaut" (the father and the breadwinner) stays behind to provide financial support to the family overseas, while the mother cares for the school child in the destination country (Aye, Guerin 2001). In Montreal, some 1,900 Korean women raise their children alone, while their husbands support them in South Korea (Yoon 2020). There is also research on *pei du mama* (study mothers), mostly from mainland China, who accompany their primary and secondary school children abroad (Chew 2009; Yeoh et al 2005).

In the context of migration from Poland, researchers pay more attention to the children left behind by migrating parents than family migration driven by educational

aspirations. Many focus on the adverse effects of parental migration on children, often called euro-orphans (Kawecki et. Al. 2015; Lutz 2017; White 2011), while others emphasize no negative consequences of parents' migration on children's education. Joanna Clifton-Sprigg's (2019) research on educational outcomes of lower secondary school Polish students suggests no negative effects of parental migration on their children's grades and overall well-being, which contradicts the public opinion in Poland that migration is detrimental to children's education. Justyna Korzeniewska, a Polish psychologist, often emphasizes the adverse effects of migration on children in press interviews (see Newsweek 2015; Szubrycht 2015). Many researchers present the issue of "children left behind," but they do so not from the perspective of the children, but rather focus on their parents. The writings of Anne White (2011), Louise Ryan et al. (2009), and Louise Ryan (2011) examine the lives of transnational Polish families in London, but their analyses are not children inclusive. Neither are the analyses undertaken by Magdalena Lopez Rodrigues (2010), who focuses on Polish mothers and parenting in the United Kingdom.

Marta Moskal (2014) is an exception. She examines Polish youths' experiences in Scottish schools. She places migrant youth and education within the theory of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1993; Coleman 1988). Using ethnographic interviews with youth and their parents, she generates a picture of family choices and decisions concerning migration, education, and the future. She portrays children as active agents and emphasizes that frequently the young people viewed their future differently from their parents. Some planed their future around Poland and made their decisions independent of whether their parents wanted to settle in Scotland or return to Poland.

Foreign-born children have been attending Polish schools for several years. However, interest in school children with migration background has been rather limited. Notable exceptions are articles about the education and integration of children of Vietnamese immigrants in Poland by Khang Duy Nguyen and Van Thi Phan (2016); the challenges Polish educators face while teaching Vietnamese children by Anna Sznajder (2016); a report by Katarzyna Gmaj (2007) on the challenges of educating children of immigrants; and an essay by Justyna Wojniak and Kinga Orzeł-Deren (2017) on the early school education of migrants and minorities in Poland.

When large numbers of Ukrainian school age children arrived in Poland following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, interest in migrant children and education has increased (Herbst & Sitek 2023). However, neither the publications preceding nor following the arrival of Ukrainians in Poland are presented in the context of migration decision-making. With this article I aim to expand our understanding of the role of children's education in the decision-making of diverse migrant families. I also want to highlight the role of children and youth in these decisions.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Migration scholars often emphasize the centrality of children when theorizing motivations for family migration. Additionally, studies of children and migration recognize children as active agents in their own lives (Moskal, Tyrrell 2016), but researchers often overlook the possibility that children and youth might have agency within their families to provide input into the migration decision-making (Bushin 2009). With three notable exceptions (Ackers 2000; Mason 2000; Bushin 2009), most studies focused on the agency of adult migration decision-makers. Analyzing Aker and Mason's research, Naomi Bushin observed that their studies "undermine the idea that migrant families are 'consensual units' (Ackers 2000: 31), although Mason (2000: 16) stated that most parents went to 'very great lengths to take children's views and interests into account'" (Bushin 2009: 430).

Following John McKendrick's (2001) call to overcome the 'absent presence' of children in population geography, Naomi Bushin proposed a

> [C]hildren-in-families approach to researching family migration decision-making [that] requires that researchers include children in their research frameworks and allow children to be active research participants when undertaking qualitative research. It also means including adult family members in research frameworks so that children's agency in migration decision-making is investigated within the context of both intragenerational and intergenerational familial networks of power (Bushin 2009: 431).

Anthropologists have also called for children to be more central to anthropological scholarship. The three principles – protection, provision, and participation – enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) have shaped the anthropology of children and childhoods. The principle of participation has stimulated research that includes children's views and perspectives and dovetails with anthropology's long-standing orientation towards the *emic* (insider's) point of view and multivocality (Bluebond-Langner, Korbin 2007). The very existence of the UNCRC has affected the feminist-influenced anthropological interest in making once-muted voices heard, and recognizing children's own agency. During the 1980s and 1990s, "a conception of children as articulate social actors who have much to say about the world, as people who can be encouraged to speak out through the adoption of ethnographic and participatory methods of research" (James 2007: 261) became a new paradigm for childhood research within anthropology (see also James, Prout 1990).

However, little of what children as social actors had to say was heard outside academia, especially when children were perceived by child advocates and social workers as vulnerable and victimized. Anthropological and ethnographic research provided "much [knowledge] about the choices made by children in the classroom, on the schoolyard, in the hospital, and at home or as consumers as well as by children on the street, in brothels, and even in armies as they opt for soldier and other

roles reserved elsewhere for grownups" (Sobo 2015: 48). There is a whole body of anthropological literature that explored the agency of trafficked children (Goździak 2016), child laborers (Howard and Okyere 2022), migrant children (Heidbrink 2014), children's rights (Hanson, Nieuwenhuys, 2020); and undocumented migrants (Terrio 2015) calling for recognition of the children's rights, voice, and agency.

At the same time, some anthropologists emphasized that expressions of child agency celebrated under the rubric of child rights are often contextually and culturally constrained (see Lancey 2008). David Lancey argued that "scientific progress is impeded by political agendas" (Lancey 2012: 2) and "the agency movement is ethnocentric, classist and hegemonic representing the dominance of contemporary bourgeoisie child-rearing. It imposes a single, privileged ethnotheory on childhood upon the diverse societies of the world with alternative ethnotheories and practices" (Lancey 2012: 1).

In this study, we proceeded with caution bearing in mind that children are developing beings, in possession of agency, and to varying degrees vulnerable, at the same time (see Rosen 2005; Ensor and Goździak 2010; Orgocka 2012). We explored children's agency, singly and in groups, in individual interviews and in groups discussions. The latter provided some insights on how children of varying ages deal with conflicts that might arise in a classroom or solve educational challenges. We have also recognized that children, like adults, cannot escape structural constraints such as curricular nationalism which limits children's ability to choose books they would like to read (Doherty 2018); placement of migrant children in schools not based on age, but rather on lack of Polish language competency, which results in migrant children being in classes with much younger classmates; obligation to learn, often interpreted as obligation to attend school, which results in children being forced to attend classes they cannot follow because of language skills, just for the sake of being marked as present in attendance registers.

Coexistence of agency and vulnerability influenced how we conducted research with migrant children and affected our ethical responsibilities towards the study participants. In selecting our sample, we excluded children under the age of 10 positing that very young children were probably neither active participants in the family decision to migrate nor could affect on-going decisions their families faced. Seeking parents' permission to approach their children to participate in the research, we also elicited their input on the mental well-being of the children to avoid re-traumatization of children who fled the war in Ukraine.

To address the methodological shift from research carried out 'on' children to research carried out 'with' children, and most recently, research carried out 'by' children (Bertozi 2010), we have recruited two teenage girls, age 15 and 17, respectively, as our co-researchers. They have been trained in basic interviewing techniques and research ethics, but at the same time were given much freedom to pursue topics that they and their peers care about the most.

This article is informed by interviews with over 40 children and youth between 10 and 19 years of age. The sample was evenly split between boys and girls. We also interviewed 20 parents, mostly mothers. The interviews were conducted between February 2023 and July 2024. The children and their parents hailed from a wide variety of countries (Brazil, Belarus, France, India, Iran, Nigeria, Poland, South Korea, Türkiye, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Several of the children came from mixed families where one parent was from Poland and one from another country (Brazil, France, UK, and US). All of the children in mixed families had Polish citizenship, but a few had dual citizenship.

The study participants were selected using two sampling techniques: (1) snowball sampling, a chain-referral method (Noy 2008) and (2) purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic sampling technique that involves intentionally selecting participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge, and experiences (Valerio et al. 2016). By combining these two sampling methods, researchers can overcome the limitations of each (sample bias, limited generalizability, sampling error) and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the studied population. Snowball sampling helps identifying and reaching out to hidden populations, while purposive sampling ensures that the selected participants meet the specific criteria of the research. In our case, the criteria included migration background and enrolment in a Polish school (Creswell 2005).

The interviews were conducted in Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and English, depending on the respondents' preferences, and lasted between one and 1.5 hours when we talked to younger children and up to 3 hours when we interviewed older teens and young adults. We conducted the interviews in the families' homes, various cafes, and in our offices. A few parents wanted to be interviewed with their children, but most of the interviews were conducted separately. In some cases, we met the children twice. Most interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed. The generated texts enabled close reading of the elicited narratives to identify important themes in the decision-making process (De Fina 2003; Eastmond 2007).

The interviews did not follow a pre-determined interview guide. Rather, we encouraged the interviewed children and parents to freely narrate their experiences with schooling in Poland by posing what James Spradely (1979) called grand tour questions, e.g., Can you walk me through your migration journey to Poland? What is it like to study in a Polish school? Can you describe a typical day in your school? These open-ended questions allowed us to follow the issues that were most important to the interviewees. The theme of decision-making in regards to education emerged spontaneously in the course of these narratives.

For migration scholars, life stories, oral histories, and personal testimonies constitute primary texts for understanding how migrants give meaning to their experiences (Benmayor, Skotnes 2005). Narratives often provide researchers with the only means of learning something about lives in time and places to which they have no

other access. Narratives are also useful for what they can tell researchers about how migrants experience migration and make sense of the changes resulting from leaving the familiar for the unknown. Personal accounts allow researchers to glean the diversity behind the overgeneralized notions of 'the migration experience.' Narrative analysis as used in much qualitative research today is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that meaning is ascribed to phenomena by being experienced and that we can only know something about people's experiences from the expression they give them (Schütz 1972 in Eastmond 2007). In other words, experience gives rise and form to narratives, but it is also organized and given meaning in the telling. Despite the importance of narratives to understanding migration from the migrants' perspective, migration studies underutilize this approach.

Findings and analysis

All of the families in this study came to Poland with children. None considered leaving children behind. None of the families considered children to be an obstacle in their decision to emigrate. Moreover, virtually all Ukrainian families fleeing war were seeking refuge in Poland to protect their children from the armed conflict. Many families who arrived in Poland under more peaceful circumstances also considered children in their decisions as they wanted to provide better opportunities for their offsprings. In a few instances, older teens traveled to Poland on their own.

In this section of the article, I present major themes that emerged from the collected narratives about leaving a home country, staying in Poland, and planning (or not) to return to the country of origin. Within each of these themes I analyze narratives concerning the role of education in the migrants' decision-making.

Leaving

In migration studies, there is a concept of 'mixed migration' that refers to both mixed composition of groups (refugees, labor migrants, stateless people) who travel from one country to another, and mixed motivations of many people on the move (Kofman 2004). Our interlocutors enumerated a myriad of reasons that resulted in the decision to leave their home country. Most had hard time identifying the main reasons, let alone naming just one. There were, however, three exceptions where the singular reason for coming to Poland was the education of their children.

Education as motivation to immigrate to Poland

It was the middle of the pandemic when Emilia and her young son travelled from Germany to Poland. Finn was bullied by a teacher in his German primary school. The teacher had no sympathy for a sensitive boy and wanted to "toughen him up." Emil-

ia would have wanted to home school her son, but homeschooling has been illegal in Germany since 1919. In very exceptional cases, parents can homeschool, but they must prove that attending school would cause their child unnecessary hardship. Only around 400 students across Germany are homeschooled in any given year (Aschmutat 2015). Changing schools was also difficult. In Germany, children attending state-run primary schools typically attend the school in their catchment area. If parents want their child to attend a different school, they must apply for a place and explain the reasons why they want to change schools (Buswell 2024).

Emilia felt that she would have had to move to a different district if she wanted her son to change schools. She thought that if she had to move across Germany, she might as well move to a different country. She quickly researched homeschooling laws in the European Union and found out that in Poland children are allowed to be taught at home with the consent of the principal of the school where the child is enrolled (Act of 14 December 2016 – Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 910, as amended). Therefore, the child does not completely lose the bond with school. After each year of study, s/he is obliged to pass exams verifying the knowledge acquired during home schooling. Such teaching may take various forms, depending on the creativity of parents and their preferred methods.

At the time of our first interview in 2023, Finn was not home schooled—he first attended a Polish public primary school and later switched to a private international Montessori school—but Emilia felt assured that if attending a regular (public or private) school did not work out for Finn, she had an option of homeschooling. As a teacher of languages, she certainly had the educational capital to undertake home schooling. Emilia commented on their decision-making as follows:

> If anything happens, he and I know that he is not stuck; it gives me a piece of mind. I don't want him to have the feeling that he's not in control of anything at his age and that people make a lot of decisions for him. At the same time, I want him to know that there are options.

Despite Finn's young age—he was only in second grade when they moved to Poland—Emilia involved him in the decision-making process since it was his desire to leave the German school where he was bullied. Later when Finn was not making much progress in a Polish public school, Emilia took him to visit several international schools to determine which one he would like to attend. She not only observed his reactions to each school, but also let him lead their conversations as they narrowed down the list of possible school choices.

Although the parent–child relationship is often perceived unequal in power (Gurdal, Sorbring 2018), Emilia thought that Finn should have a say in deciding which school he wanted to attend. Her actions corresponded with a perception that children are agentic, that they are actively creating meaning in life (Kuczynski 2003) and can participate in decision making (Mayall 1994).

Desire to immerse in Polish language and culture

One of the Polish-American families that had made a permanent home in the United States, came to Poland with the sole purpose for Alex and Tom to improve their Polish. Alina, the boys' Polish mother, said: "You cannot call yourself a Pole if you don't speak Polish. We came to live in Poland for a couple of years so my sons can get in touch with their Polish heritage and identity." She ignored the fact that her husband is a Filipino American and seemed surprised when I asked whether the boys would be learning Tagalog as well.

An interesting discussion regarding identity ensued where the mother saw her US-born sons as Polish, while the father thought of them as Americans with all the privileges that birthright citizenship brought. The boys said they were both. Their response corresponds with the growing literature on children in 'mixed' families (e.g., Caballero, Edwards, Puthussery 2008; Kil, Taing, Mageau, 2021). Since both parents were present during our interview, I could not probe whether they truly had a double identity or did not want to hurt their mother's feeling by saying they identified as Americans.

Early in our conversation, Alex shared that when he first arrived in his Polish school he was perceived as different from his Polish classmates who pointed out his olive skin color, his native proficiency in English, and his accented Polish as differentiating features. Alex also felt different because he felt uneasy in a very structured school environment. He said:

> In my school in America, we didn't sit and listened to teachers lecturing all day long. We worked in groups and could move between different teams. We focused on solving problems, not on trying to remember everything the teacher said. It is so different here…

Alina, on the other hand, conceptualized her sons' identity in somewhat primordial ways (Brubaker, Cooper 2000). "They have a Polish mother," she said, "therefore they are Polish." I found it surprising given the fact that the family lived in the United States where hyphenated identities (Deaux 2008) abound and where ethnic identity politics are fierce (Bernstein 2005).

Unaccompanied adolescents coming to attend high school in Poland

In a vocational high school in Poznań, we have encountered an interesting phenomenon of unaccompanied Ukrainian adolescents coming to Poland to attend high school. As early as 2019, the school was approached by a placement agency to ascertain whether they would accept Ukrainian adolescents to learn various trades. The school principal was amenable and since then the school has been accepting about 10 Ukrainian high schoolers each year through the same agency.

According to the school principal, parents bring their children to Poland, sign all the necessary enrolment documents, and leave to go back to Ukraine. The young people are placed in the school dormitory where they have some supervision, but nobody envisioned a situation when any of the children would need a legal guardian present in Poland. A couple of months after the arrival of the first cohort, one student had to be hospitalized. Since he was brought to the hospital in an ambulance, he was treated, and nobody asked where his parents were. However, when he was ready to be discharged the hospital said that they could release him only to his legal guardians. The hospital threatened that if an appropriate adult didn't present at the hospital the boy would be placed with social services. The school asked to give the boy's father 24 hours to come to Poland and collect his son.

The practice of using agencies to place children in foreign high schools has been quite common in Ukraine. Even a cursory Internet search reveals a multiplicity of agencies placing children and young adults in high schools and universities abroad. Since the war, many more parents sent their children abroad, some of them accompanied by relatives, but some on their own. Lacking proper legal guardians, 240 Ukrainian children across the European Union (EU) have been placed with Child Protective Services.

These cases point to the need to harmonize Ukrainian and EU legal provisions governing the movement of children under the age of 18. In the European Union, the law considers children under the age of 18 as minors with no volition of their own. The case of the vocational high school that continues to receive unaccompanied Ukrainian students was resolved by the recruitment agency appointing a Ukrainian legal guardian who resides in Poznań. However, to resolve the issue of unaccompanied minors on the macro level, on July 11, 2023, the Verkhovna Rada presented a draft law No. 9480 that would limit the departure of Ukrainian teenagers aged 16 to 18 to other countries. Previously, only children under 16 years of age needed permission from their parents to travel abroad.

Staying

Whether the families in our study came to settle in Poland permanently, as was the case of some mixed families with a Polish parent, or came to spend a few years in the country, they all had to make decisions regarding schooling for their children.

In Poland, education is compulsory until the age of 18 (Act of December 14, 2016 – Education Law). Migrant children are not exempted from this obligation. However, migrant families had an option to enroll their children in online schools in their home country. Many Ukrainian families chose this option. According to the Center for Civic Education (Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej), in 2023, 56 percent of school age children from Ukraine living in Poland did not attend Polish schools. The percentage was even higher among children born between 2004 and 2007; 78 percent of

those children were outside the Polish educational system (https://oko.press/dzieci-z-ukrainy-nie-chodza-do-polskich-szkol). In a meeting with journalists, Joanna Mucha, deputy minister of education, announced that starting in the 2024/25 school year all Ukrainian children will have to attend a school in Poland (Ćwiek-Świdecka 2024). Moreover, starting in September 2024, financial assistance, known as 800 plus, will be tied to school attendance (Broda 2024).

There are many different types of schools in Poznań and Wrocław, including public, charter (*szkoła społeczna*), and private schools; state-run schools with instruction in Polish and international schools where English is the language of instruction; and more recently Ukrainian schools. Migrant families and their children have many choices.

Public or private school?

When I first embarked on this research, I thought I would limit my study to public schools and examine migrant children's integration within the state-run educational system. However, it soon became apparent that many students were switching schools for a variety of reasons, and I would lose sight of the choices they and their families were making if I only focused on public schools.

Many newly arrived families did not have the resources to consider anything else but public schools. However, some families tapped into their savings to provide the best school experience for their children. Marie and Jan, a French-Polish couple, and their two sons, age 5 and 7, returned to Poznan from London just before a school year started. They wanted the boys to attend a neighborhood public school, but they were told they would have to wait since there were no spots available. Jan called a friend who owns a Montessori school, and she was happy to enroll the boys. By the time of our interview, both boys were attending a public school two blocks away from their apartment. Both the boys and the parents were very happy with the school, but Marie said:

> In retrospect, I think it was good for them to spend a year in a Montessori. It allowed them to get familiar with speaking Polish daily… before they only spoke Polish with their father. It was also good for my younger son to be in the same classroom with his brother. It provided comfort.

Nergis who was born in Poland to Turkish parents started her education in a Polish public school in a small town outside Poznań. She learnt Polish fast and was doing well academically. However, she was bullied by her classmates, possibly because her mother, who didn't speak any Polish and wore *hijab,* was perceived as an outsider. Nergis and her mom returned to Turkey for a few years, but when they came back to Poland, Nergis insisted on going to an international school in Poznań even though her two brothers attended public schools. She felt that going to school in a big city and being in an international environment would be more comfortable. Her parents

agreed with her decision. When we last spoke, she graduated from high school and is planning to go to college outside Poland.

Changing schools did not solely involve going from public to private school. Several children went from a public school to another public school. The reasons were almost always related to bullying or conflicts. Two brothers in a Polish American family moved schools twice because of bullying. The older boy said:

> Polish teachers have no classroom management skills and no conflict resolution skills. When a fight breaks out, they send the offending parties to resolve it by themselves in the hallway or send them to the principal's office. In the United States, teachers know how to resolve conflicts and use them as a teaching moment…

Schools with instruction in Polish, Ukrainian, or English

The choice of public and private school was often related to the language of instruction. Obviously, Polish is the language of instruction in all public and charter schools as well as in some private schools (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, proprietary schools (*szkoły autorskie*)). Most of the mixed families, with one Polish parent, opted to send their children to public schools. After all, improving Polish was the main goal of coming to Poland. Parents saw the ability of speaking Polish as a main element of their children's identity even if the children insisted that they had dual identity. A couple of mixed families sent their children to international schools or to an English immersion Polish school. In one case, the mother of the family requested I interview her children in English. "It is their native language," she said. Another family also moved back and forth between Poland and the United Kingdom for the daughters to retain a native English proficiency and a British accent.

Many families with two foreign-born parents also opted for a public school, because they planned to stay in Poland and wanted their children to learn Polish quickly. A Ukrainian teacher who teaches Polish at a Ukrainian school in Wrocław sent her daughter to a public school. She said: "We are here to stay. I want her to be well-integrated and have Polish friends."

Some families started taking Polish lessons while preparing to emigrate to Poland. Eva and Natasha and their parents arrived in Poland from Ukraine in 2019. Preparing to come to Poland, the whole family took Polish language classes. It provided a good start for the girls. Some families have transferred their children from a private international to a public or private Polish school to ensure their children's proficiency in the local language. This was the case of two American siblings, and a Syrian and an Afghan girl in Wrocław.

Several Belarussian families in Wroclaw also insisted on sending their children to public schools. Some of them had the means to pay tuition in a private school, but knowing Polish and being integrated into the Polish community was their priority. Eliza said: "Even before we managed to escape and come to Poland, I dreamt of

going to a university in Poland." Both she and her younger brother are in public schools and doing exceptionally well.

Given the large number of Ukrainian school age children that arrived in Poland after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2023, the Minister of Education recommended yearlong preparatory classes as an effective strategy to integrate Ukrainian children into Polish schools. The minister argued that Ukrainian students would feel more comfortable in the same linguistic peer group rather than in a regular classroom.

The issue whether to mainstream immigrant children or place them in separate classes has been debated for many years in many countries (Ahad, Benton 2018; Jóźwiak, Nestorowicz, Lesińska 2014). According to OECD (2015), integrating migrant children into mainstream classes from the beginning results in better educational and social outcomes. The report emphasizes that language training is essential, but it should be offered in addition to, not instead of, regular course work.

> Peer groups of the same ethno-linguistic background might be sites of comfort and belonging, but they can also lead to exclusion from the wider school community. We have seen this in several classrooms with a sizeable group of Ukrainian students who bond together both inside and outside the classroom as they sit together at lunch and socialize together after school.

Some Ukrainian families value the support of the ethno-linguistic group so much that they decided to send their children to an all-Ukrainian school. There are Ukrainian schools both in Poznań and in Wrocław. In Wrocław, a Ukrainian Educational Center, conceived as an extension of preparatory classes, was established to ease Ukrainian children's entrance into the Polish educational system. Currently, the center is part of a private school. While it has a separate campus for Ukrainian children, it has many connections with the 'Polish' part of the school through visits and teacher sharing. It is envisioned that two years of 'preparatory' activities will facilitate a smooth transition to the Polish campus. Visits and meetings with Polish students notwithstanding, two years of existence in an ethnic enclave does not bode well for social integration with Polish children.

Private schools were chosen by families who came with children knowing no Polish, or families with children who have grown accustomed to attending international schools. Several teens told me that they preferred an international school not solely based on their inability to speak Polish but because they wanted to be part of a very cosmopolitan school environment. Non-Caucasian teens, especially those who experienced being stared at in public spaces, thought an international school, by definition, might not be ethnically and racially homogenous and they would feel that they belong from day one.

Planning to return

Although many migrants do not always go back, the imagined return persists in their minds for a long time (Limbu, Yu 2023). In this study, parents and children talked about return at different junctions of their stay in Poland, including shortly after arrival or much later when teens were considering their future.

A state of limbo

When we first started interviewing Ukrainians in early 2022, many Ukrainian families occupied a liminal space, understood here as any "betwixt or between" situation (Genova, Zontini 2019; Popyk 2021). Sudden displacement following Russia's invasion, on-going political and public narratives on the temporality of war, separation from families, and not knowing when/if it will be safe to go back to Ukraine, affected parents and their children's decision-making and motivations to learn Polish and integrate into the Polish society. Parents and children wondered whether it was worth investing in learning a new language. Teachers talked about lack of motivation on the part of their Ukrainian pupils to succeed in school. A teacher in a vocational high school remarked:

> Many parents do not understand that there is an obligation to learn in Poland, but not necessarily to go to school. Those teens who don't like being in school can choose apprenticeships, courses teaching a trade … but until they turn 18 years old, they must document that they are learning… There are alternatives to schools.

However, as time went on many families realized that to survive, they must learn Polish. Children recognized that Polish was essential to doing well in school and developing friendships with Polish classmates. Families that planned to leave Poland and go to Germany or Canada started learning German and English, respectively.

Moving within Poland to find better schools

There were a couple of different families in our sample that moved or are contemplating to move within Poland to find a school that meets their children's educational goals. A Scandinavian-American couple wants to move from Warsaw to Poznań to find a better school environment for their two children. They had moved before for the same reason, from Cracow to Warsaw. They have given up on finding a suitable school for their autistic son and will be homeschooling him but are hopeful that they will find a good match for their daughter. They are considering international schools, including Montessori.

A Ukrainian family moved from Cracow to Kalisz to be in a place with smaller schools for their children and better jobs for the mother. However, Evelina who will

graduate from a technical high school next year would like to move back to Cracow. She misses her friends and thinks it will be easier to find work as a hairdresser in Cracow and eventually open her own beauty salon.

Decision-making about the future

Some of the interviewed youth maintain strong transnational ties with the country of origin. Rohan, a 19-year-old graduate of a private international school in Poznań, hopes to pursue a medical degree at the Poznań University of Medical Sciences (PUMS). He said this about his future:

> If I get into medicine, I want to complete my residency here and work here for few years and then I want to go back to India because I want to give back to my community. I think people have this notion that when we go abroad, we settle there, send money back, but never go back. I want to go back when I am in my mid-30s, work for a few years, and retire when I am 50 from practicing medicine and get into teaching…. I want to have time for gardening and growing my own food and cooking….

Some scholars suggest that ethnicity is an important element in migrant adolescents' identity formation (Suarez-Orozco 2004; Karataş et al. 2023), while others emphasize that many migrant youths built ethnically diverse relationships (Moskal 2014) in their country of settlement. Rohan certainly has a wide circle of friends, including many Polish friends.

At 19 years of age Rohan is an adult and can make his own decisions. He is leaving the way back to India open, incorporating both instrumental and affective dimensions of the cultures he traverses. His parents are supportive of his plans.

Sima, an Afghan medical student, stayed in Wrocław while her mother and brothers moved to Germany. She has developed skills and competences to navigate the Polish educational system, which ensured her successful entry into the much-coveted program at the Medical University in Wrocław. If she followed her family to Germany, she would not have been able to attend a medical school there as her German is very limited.

Ha-joon was born in South Korea but lived and went to school in Vietnam, Russia, and Hungary before he and his father came to Poland. An aspiring linguist, he considers language to be a defining factor of one's identity. Ha-joon speaks and reads both formal and informal Korean even though he has not lived in South Korea since he was a baby, but he visits South Korea often. When I asked him if he has any plans to go back to South Korea, he said that he would not go back until he is 37 years old when he no longer would have to complete the mandatory military service that all South Korean males are required to fulfil.

Ha-joon is 18 years old and is getting ready to embark on his tertiary education. He has been provisionally accepted at a university in Holland provided his International

Baccalaureate (IB) grades meet the university's requirements. Ha-joon's father is supportive of both his son's educational goals and his desire to avoid military service.

Rohan, Sima, and Ha-joon are making their decisions in consultation and with the support of their parents, but in migration literature, there are multiple examples of young people making plans independent of their parents' desire to settle in a destination country or return to the home country (Moskal 2014).

Concluding thoughts

This article is part of a larger research project, titled *Good beginnings, promising futures. Children with migration background in Polish schools*, to study inclusion and integration of migrant children in schools in Poznań and Wrocław. This is a pioneering research project at the nexus of migration studies and education. It is innovative in terms of both topic and methodology. The topic of inclusion and belonging of migrant children in Polish schools has not been explored so far, though there has been some research on migrant children in Poland as discussed in the literature review section. Many of the above cited studies explored migrant education from a point of view of students or educators. In this study we explored the issues of belonging and integration in schools from multiple perspectives, namely the perspective of students, parents, teachers, and educators. We also relied on diverse methodological approaches. The increasing attention towards children's and adolescents' rights and the involvement of minors in issues directly concerning them has led to a gradual methodological shift from studies about children to participatory research with and by children (Bertozi 2010). This project follows this methodological trajectory. As discussed in the methodology section, we have solicited the assistance of two adolescent co-researchers. This project is also significant in terms of anthropological inquiry into migration and multicultural education (Vertovec 2007). Anthropology of education is a burgeoning sub-field of anthropology, especially in the United States. In Poland, it does not command the same interest (Drozdowicz 2017).

In this article I have focused on the role of education in migrant families' decision-making, but several other articles—on heritage language preservation; sociocultural exclusion in Polish schools; and parents' involvement with their children's schools—stemming from our research are forthcoming. The data presented in this article unequivocally show the significance and value of education in migrant families' decision-making processes and provides rich ethnographic material to illustrate that decisions to migrate are not solely motivated by a desire to improve one's livelihoods.

The case of Finn and his mother as well as the case of Alina's family show how education drove their migration from Germany and the United States, respectively, to Poland. As indicated above, families also moved within Poland to find better schooling option. Several interviewed adolescents on the verge of graduating from high

schools and vocational schools talked about moving to cities in Poland with better tertiary education and professional opportunities.

Education also affected other decisions. The parents of Eva and Natasha searched for good schools for the girls before they looked for housing. In fact, they started looking at school ranking even before they left Ukraine. The family also began to learn Polish while still in Ukraine to ease the girls' adjustment to a Polish school. One of the Belarusian mothers joined the Parent Council at her sons' school to improve her own Polish language capacity. She works for an international corporation and communicates solely in English with her colleagues and speaks Russian at home. Her involvement in the Parent Council provided an opportunity to practice Polish.

Ukrainian parents brought their children to Poland to protect them from armed conflict. Belarusian parents immigrated to Poland for their children to experience freedom. Korean parents in Wrocław emphasized that they wished to protect their children from the burden of the stressful, competition-driven education culture of their home country. A young Korean man who recently obtained his B.A. in Poznań has embarked on another course of study to avoid "the pressure-cooker known as Korean education." It seems that pre-migration experiences and the culture of their country of origin affected their decision-making (Moskal 2014).

While most of the families in our sample came to Poland with children, some families decided to separate when their offsprings were making decisions regarding tertiary education. Sima decided to pursue medical training in Wrocław even though her mother and brothers moved to Germany to take advantage of the support of the Afghan ethnic community. Ha-joon, on the other hand, applied to a university in the Netherlands while his father will remain in Poznań. In both cases, the decision—to remain in Poland or migrate to another country—was related to the skills and competencies these two young adults developed. Sima with her good grades and proficiency in Polish had a much higher chance to be accepted in a medical school in Poland than in Germany. Conversely, Ha-joon, a product of international schools, has limited proficiency in Polish and is looking to further his education outside Poland using his exceptional knowledge of English. Additionally, he thinks that that a diploma from a Dutch university will provide him with more employment opportunities than a diploma from a Polish university.

Researchers call for more conceptual and empirical research on migrants' decision-making. They posit that even with a growing number of studies, "we still have inconclusive answers regarding why some people decide to migrate while others do not." Furthermore, they indicate that "despite the focus of different strands of research on aspects such as aspirations, information, temporality, or human agency in decision-making, the fact that these dimensions are closely interconnected has hardly been addressed in the literature" (Czaika et al. 2021, 26).

To fully comprehend migration decision-making, it is important to adopt a flexible perspective to account for the myriads of influences, but it is equally important

to study in-depth already identified motivations, in this case the role of education in decisions and aspiration regarding mobility. Except for a few young adults, I focused on children under the age of 18. It would be important to undertake longitudinal studies to see if education continues to drive young people's mobility within Poland or outside Poland. I would also be interested in how their educational experiences in Poland affected their decision-making abilities regarding their own children's schooling in the future.

More immediately, it would be crucial to study the effects of new educational policies on Ukrainian families' decision-making. Starting in September 2024, Ukrainian children in Poland who remain outside the Polish education system will be obliged to attend a Polish school. This decision, made in consultation with Ukrainian officials, emphasizes the commitment to providing stable education for 50,000–60,000 Ukrainian children who have so far been able to continue their Ukrainian education remotely. According to the Deputy Minister of Education, Joanna Mucha, the new obligation to attend Polish school is connected to financial assistance provided to Ukrainian school children (Borek 2024). It would be important to research the effects of this new policy on Ukrainian families' decisions, including decision-making regarding their children's education and possible return migration to Ukraine or onward migration to other countries.

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