

Polish Teacher Competencies in Teaching Students from Migrant Backgrounds in Preparatory Classes

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The number of students in the Polish education system from migrant backgrounds has regularly increased in the second decade of the 21st century. Many of them arrive with little to no literacy in Polish. The educational system was not prepared to accommodate these new students; Poland was previously considered an emigration country as opposed to an immigration one. Polish classes were linguistically and culturally homogeneous and teachers rarely had Polish language learners in their classrooms. They were not used to teaching multicultural, mixed, and heterogeneous groups of students and most have to find teaching strategies to best respond to new students who were also learning Polish.

Changes in Polish educational laws in 2016 opened up the possibility of preparatory classes (PC) (*oddziały przygotowawcze*) in schools, although some schools decided to challenge this. In this paper, teachers' competencies in teaching the newly arrived students in reception classes is discussed. This research was carried out with the goal of understanding teachers' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and competencies in this completely new context in their professional experience, namely teaching students from a migrant background in preparatory classes, as well as students who need language or academic support, require intercultural education and a friendly learning environment, or for whom curricula in regular classes were not accessible.

Keywords: teachers' competencies, preparatory classes, migrant education, integration

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Introduction

The problem

International human rights law² guarantees an education for all without discrimination. In Poland, all children, including children with a migrant background, can go to school until the age of 18 and can receive support in education, language learning, and academic achievement. The implementation of the right to equal education for migrants poses a number of challenges and dilemmas for the governments of host countries; the system in Poland requires some adjustments. According to the Supreme Audit Office (NIK), which presented a report on the education of migrant children in 2019, migrant children in the Polish education system, "...do not face obstacles in accessing education or schools, however, when it comes to integration, the activities on offer in schools are limited. The findings also demonstrate that the Ministry of Education has shown little interest in the issue of integration and does not monitor the effectiveness of education programs for migrant children," (NIK, 2019).

The basic problem that teachers have in terms of teaching students with migrant backgrounds is a lack of experience in teaching Polish language learners – students with migrant background. Many of them don't know how to teach students with poor or no skills in Polish; this often makes teaching impossible. Textbooks on learning Polish as a foreign language focus more on communication and are not relevant as didactic materials for teaching academic language. The Supreme Audit Office Report "Education Of Children Of Parents Returning To The Country And Children Of Foreigners (KNO.430.014.2019 Nr 42/2020/P/19/028/KNO) also show a very poor level of support from schools. According to teachers that were interviewed by an officer of the Supreme Audit Office, many students have adaptation and integration problems. According to the data, "...teachers seem to be a relatively strong link. Despite the institutional lack of support, they do their job with great commitment in most cases." For that reason, we decided to investigate how the teachers' competencies and schools' capacities respond to the needs of students from a migrant background.

Educational systems play a critical role in the integration of students from migrant backgrounds. It is important to understand how teachers working in preparatory classes (classes for newly arrived students) dealt with integration and how they evaluate their own professional competencies in order to facilitate reflection on the inclusion of newcomers in the educational system and analyze the level to which teachers are prepared to work with immigrant children.

² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 26; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, art. 28,29

The context of the study

Preparatory classes are a relatively new organizational change in Polish education that is specifically for students with migrant backgrounds who have little or no knowledge of the Polish language and/or have problems adapting to Polish schools. The goal is to help them integrate into the Polish school system. This kind of support has many advantages, although there are also some weaknesses. It is certainly a bridge between two realities, life before and after emigration, and helps in the process of adaptation. It also helps with learning the Polish language and culture. However, the implementation of the assumptions of the Regulation of the Minister of Education concerning teaching students with migration experience can be a challenge for the schools and their teachers. This system requires good organization and understanding of the migrant education experience; if poorly implemented, it may increase the risk of marginalization.

The quality of school admission is an important part of the process of adaptation and knowledge of the language of the country of settlement is one of the most important factors of successful integration. Therefore, this article addresses the issue of preparatory classes, which are these students' first encounter with a Polish school, the environment in which they learn a new language and culture, and where they begin to build a new identity.

The observations and the literature review on the education and integration of students newly arrived in the country who do not know the language showed that more effective support is needed. The need assistance in the learning and integration process so that they do not drop out of the system. Effective education for migrants supports integration processes and increases the possibility of educational success despite language, cultural, and educational barriers (Armagnague-Roucher et al., 2018; Hanemann, 2018; Klein, 2012; Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2017; Mendonça Dias, 2012; Wright, 2010).

In 2016, a new educational organization for students with migrant backgrounds was implemented in Polish educational law. The Regulation of the Minister of Education of 9 September 2016 on the education of non-Polish citizens and persons who are Polish citizens, who were educated in schools operating in the education systems of other countries. Based on Article. 94a paragraph. 6 of the Law on School Education (Prawo Oświatowe) of 7 September 1991 on the education system (Journal of Laws of 2015, item 2156 and of 2016, items 35, 64, 195, 668 and 1010) Journal of Law 2016 item 59, 949 allowed schools to open preparatory classes for both non-Polish citizens and Polish citizens who either are involved in the education system from abroad, do not know the Polish language or cannot speak Polish well enough to benefit from education, or show communication disorders and adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or an environmental change. All of these students require educational organization suited to their needs and equality in terms of educational opportunities in accordance with the provisions issued pursuant to

Article 165(16)(2) of Education Law (Journal of law 2017/59, 949). According to the law, from 2016, these students could benefit from this form of education for 12 effective months with the possibility of extension for another year. They could also receive, for the first 12 months, the support of a cultural assistant whom the school could hire under an employment contract. The cultural assistant had no status as a teacher or assistant teacher. This solution allowed for the planning of long-term language, academic, and integration support for students with migrant backgrounds. In the preparatory classes, teachers are required to follow the same curriculum as the mainstream classes, but have to adapt it to the specific needs of the students. The law allows for the organization of one preparatory class for children at potentially three different stages, which means that a teacher may be obliged to work with three different curricula at once. In these classes, students should focus on learning Polish. There is no indication in the regulation that it is necessary to introduce an intercultural approach in this class structure.

A reform of the Polish school system has been underway since 1 September 2017. The Law on School Education (Prawo oświatowe) and Provisions Introducing the Law on School Education (Przepisy wprowadzające prawo oświatowe) replaced the School Education Act (Ustawa o systemie oświaty) on September 7th, 1991. The current provisions resulted in little to no change for preparatory classes. They structured the organization differently, making it slightly less favorable for students from migrant backgrounds. The duration of their stay in the preparatory class can potentially be shortened because, "...the period of study of a pupil in the preparatory unit lasts until the end of the didactic and educational classes in the school year in which the pupil was qualified for the preparatory unit, but this period, depending on the pupil's learning progress and his/her educational needs, may be shortened or extended, not longer than by one school year." This means that the duration of stay depends on the moment of enrollment of a pupil in the school. Unfortunately, students do not necessarily immigrate completely in sync with the school calendar. Therefore, under the current provision, the length of support will depend on the moment they arrive at a Polish school. Students who arrive at school later will benefit from this teaching arrangement for a shorter period of time.

The current extant legal documents also provide support for people who speak the language of their country of origin. The duration of this support has not changed. This assistance shall be provided for a maximum of 12 months and is primarily focused on supporting the learning process and not on the fuller integration of the student.

According to the regulations, learning in preparatory classes should be organized as follows. The Ministry of Education states teaching in the unit should be organized in such a way as to enable students to learn in accordance with the core curriculum of general education and should be conducted, "...in accordance with curricula implemented at school, with the adjustment of methods and forms of their implementation to individual developmental and educational needs and psychophysical capabilities

of students.” This provision indicates that the implementation of the core curriculum is key. However, this requirement is particularly difficult to achieve in reality. When working with students in preparatory classes, it is necessary to not only modify the methods and forms of work but also to adapt the content to the language capabilities of the students. Students at the A1 or even A2 level do not have sufficient language skills to learn the same content as students fluent in Polish. Researchers working on the language of school education (Beacco et al., 2015; Cummins, 2008; Pamuła-Behrens, 2017; Pamuła-Behrens & Szymańska, 2018) indicate that much more time is needed to learn the language than to master everyday communication. Perhaps the legislators intended for Polish language courses to be a reference point for migrant students and indicates them as a reference when building curricula for students with migration experience. It needs to be stressed, however, that the aforementioned program is completely incompatible with the principles of teaching at school. Also, the number of hours needed to master the language at the indicated level are unrealistic and inadequate for the current research and practice. It is difficult to imagine learning Polish at A2 level in the 50 hours suggested by the legislature.

After the introduction of the possibility of organizing preparatory wards, criticisms and fears regarding this potential solution emerged. During the meeting of the Committee of Experts on Migration Issues, organized by the Ombudsman the 12th of December 2016³, the invited experts highlighted the weakness of this solution for two reasons, the need to implement the core curriculum and the risk of marginalization. The experts worried that the creation of such classes would amount to the adoption of a separative model of teaching. This risk of marginalization is certainly real, but it does not stem from the way that education is organized. There are many factors, but one of them is fundamental; this is the preparation of the school environment.

Students with migrant backgrounds enter the educational system at different points throughout the school year; working with them, therefore, requires a lot of flexibility and organization. They need time to adapt, and preparatory classes may offer such an opportunity. I agree with the opinion of a Swiss specialist in the education and integration of immigrants, Christoph Blanchet, who is currently responsible for the organization and supervision of education and integration of immigrants in the canton of Vaud. In an interview on the organization of preparatory classes, he stated that inception classes are important because they are places where education fits the student and not the other way around. He stressed that they are especially important for students with little knowledge of the language and culture of the country of settlement, for students with educational gaps, and also for those coming into the educational system late. These groups need special support in order not to drop out of the system for linguistic and cultural reasons. The preparatory units are necessary for them.

³ <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/pl/content/posiedzenie-komisji-ekspertow-ds-migrantow-12-12-16>

Preparatory classes are not only places of learning but also places of adaptation and integration. They are often the first safe space in an unknown world, a place where a student has the opportunity to find himself and learns to live in a new community. It is a bridge between what was previously “mine” and what is “becoming mine.” It is a space for taming, and taming, as the fox said to the Little Prince, means to create bonds and to “establish ties.” The teachers in these classes become the first linguistic and cultural mediators. With them, schooling can be linked to the concept of vulnerability and resilience. Students, and particularly students with migrant backgrounds, can establish a relationship with them based on trust, a sense of security, and comfort. It is therefore necessary to prepare teachers for work in preparatory classes and to support them as well.

Research questions

This research set out to improve the understanding of the challenges of the new organizational structure of preparatory classes and also to learn about teachers’ competencies in terms of working in this new educational environment.

The research addressed the following questions:

RQ1. How are teachers’ feelings of preparedness for teaching preparatory classes?

RQ2. How confident do teachers feel about teaching preparatory classes?

RQ3. How do teachers working in preparatory classes evaluate their self-efficacy for teaching in them?

We carried out this research to better understand teachers’ beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and competencies regarding this entirely new context, namely teaching students with a migrant background who need assistance in learning academic content, require language and cultural support, and for whom standard curricula is not accessible.

Teachers’ competencies: Literature overview

Defining and assessing teachers’ professional knowledge and competence is not simple. Therefore, “competence statements, so as to recognize the multifaceted nature of teaching, and acknowledge the role of values, need to be clear and not overelaborate,” (Conway et al., 2009 in Caena, 2011). However, to create adequate teacher training programs, a systematic reflection on the specific competencies needed for teachers working with immigrants is required because “Teachers and therefore schools matter importantly for students achievements” (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005:449).

If teachers’ competencies have powerful effects on student achievement, teaching immigrant students specific educational needs will require specific knowledge, skills, and understanding language acquisition problems, values, and attitudes.

Many publications describe teacher competencies, but what competencies do they need when teaching students with migrant backgrounds who may be from different places, speak different languages, and often have no skills in the language of schooling? If the teaching context is taken into consideration, including the decreasing status of the teaching profession, the burden of bureaucratic activities at school, and difficult work conditions, "...it may make the task of providing individualized support too demanding for some teachers, especially when they have large numbers of migrant students in need of help. In these circumstances, there is a risk that migrant students will be perceived as a burden", (Hamilton, 2013 in European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

Teachers' feelings of preparedness and self-confidence are important for their performance and also have a significant influence on student achievement (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012, Tchannen-Moran et al., 1998). Many teachers have little confidence in their ability to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse environments (Siwatu, 2007, 2011, Bełszynska, 2010, Pamuła-Behrens & Hannel-Brzozowska, 2017).

Following this, we decided to evaluate the professional competencies of teachers who are teaching preparatory classes in terms of their knowledge and understanding, skills, and dispositions (beliefs, attitudes, values, and commitment).

Teaching students with a migrant background in Poland

We can see that the problem of teaching immigrant students is relatively new in the Polish educational system. According to the NIK report (2019), "The number of international students covered by the Polish education system went up from 9,610 persons in 2009 to 51,363 persons in 2019. The biggest group in schools for children and youth were students from Ukraine: 30,777 persons. Classes for foreign students were conducted in the school year 2019/2020 in 7,318 schools for children and youth (as compared with 1,571 schools in the school year 2009/2010). (...) the number of schools for children and youth attended by international students has gone up almost 5 times within 10 years (from 2009 to 2019 this number has increased from 1,571 to 7,318)."

Research and writing on professional development and professional competencies of teachers in this field began just a few years ago. Collecting data on students from migrant backgrounds was not a priority for educational managers; reforms in the educational system significantly changed the school system and curricula. New school organization was the priority. However, more studies have emerged over time as more and more immigrant students have entered the Polish school system.

The first important research concerning immigrant education in Poland was presented by Błeszyńska (2010). She noticed that among the teachers who took part in the survey, 40% did not see the need to adapt their teaching to the special educational needs of immigrant students. Most of the teachers were convinced that there was no

need to adapt the way of evaluating a student to his/her cultural and linguistic specificity. The presence of foreign children in the classroom evoked ambivalent feelings and ambiguous attitudes. The teachers pointed to many integration barriers, which they attributed to migrant students (language limitations, religious differences, lack of willingness to integrate), Polish students (ethnic stereotypes and prejudices), and educational authorities. Błęszyńska noticed that working with foreign children was a source of stress for the teachers and provoked a sense of overloading. She also stressed that about 90% of teachers felt either unprepared or insufficiently prepared to work with immigrant students while simultaneously declaring that they were definitely satisfied with their competences and strongly confirming their professional skills. This inconsistency in teachers' verbal declarations allows for the hypothesis that most teachers are, in fact, not prepared to work with children with a migration experience. A few years later, Błęszyńska continued her research on teacher attitudes and competencies. She noticed that the teachers still, "...demonstrated a relatively weak knowledge of the educational policies concerning the education of foreign pupils, a lack of general knowledge concerning cultural differences, the specificity of immigration and refugee problems, and an insufficient understanding of the pupils themselves. Not all of them were aware of the countries of origin of their pupils, what their cultural specificity was, or what religion they adhered to," (Błęszyńska, 2017). The same year, research concerning 60 primary school teachers was published (Pamuła-Behrens & Hennel-Brzozowska, 2017) and the results were similar. Teachers did not feel prepared to teach immigrant students and many of them, being at the end of their careers, were not interested in any professional development in this area. Teachers expressed a preference for teaching children without specific educational needs in environment that they were familiar with (Pamuła-Behrens & Hennel-Brzozowska, 2017). Herudzińska was also interested in teachers working with students with migrant backgrounds and their intercultural competencies. She found that teachers, "...usually have little or no experience in the field of working with the foreign schoolchild – the scale of multiculturalism in our educational institutions is not very great. Even if they have it, support for foreign schoolchildren still requires reorganization and improvement (despite all the actions taken)," (Herudzińska, 2018). Dąbrowa's study also focused on intercultural competencies, with slightly different results. According to her, the analysis of the data shows a positive picture of the intercultural competencies of teachers. One hypothesis regarding these results could be that this is more due to the involvement, experience, and responsibility of the school staff than the system solutions. She also stressed that there are no specific solutions for the professional development of teachers working with immigrants and supporting school staff in this specific and challenging situation (Dąbrowa, 2018).

Only a few articles have mentioned how teachers should be prepared and what competencies they need to have in order to work in this specific environment with these specific students. This is especially evident in research that focuses on student

problems (Mikulska 2019a, 2019b; Szulgan, 2019). Two texts present a study concerning teachers' competencies and deeper reflections on their professional development.

The study of Pamuła-Behrens and Szymańska tried to determine whether teachers are prepared to respond appropriately to the educational and emotional needs of immigrant students; their results shows that teachers need to have professional competencies to work successfully with learners with migrant backgrounds, many teachers often feel unprepared and lack knowledge or skills in terms of the processes of teaching and learning Polish as a foreign/second language, bilingualism, the psychology of migration, interculturalism, the methodology of teaching Polish as a foreign or second language, and Polish as the language of school education. They should also expand their competencies through longer or additional forms of professional training courses and not through short ones, as the study subjects indicated that those resulted in little success (Kościółek *at al.* , 2019). Another study was focused on the interdisciplinary approach to evaluate on the state of teachers' preparation for teaching in a multicultural and multilingual context in the schools in Kraków. They found that still 20% of teachers do not feel prepared to work with immigrants, especially in terms of teaching from the perspective of Polish as a second/foreign language, though they are open to professional development (Kościółek, 2020).

Method

In the school year 2017/18, there were 29,942 foreign students in the Polish school system. Most of them learned in mainstream classes; only 10 public schools decided to implement preparatory classes (oddziały przygotowawcze) for newcomers. Private schools were unable to implement preparatory classes at this time, which changed in 2020.

School year	Number of students who were non-Polish citizens (System Informacji Oświatowej (SIO), September 30th every year)	
	Total	Participated in Polish language classes
2016/2017	20 911	6 808
2017/2018	29 942	9 780
2018/2019	51 363	17 708

Four schools were located in the urban sectors of some of the biggest Polish cities, Warsaw, Poznan, and Gdansk, one was in the suburbs of Warsaw, and one was in a small village in the north of Poland. The schools which took part in the survey in Poznan and Gdansk welcomed immigrants, especially from Ukraine, as they had experience teaching Ukrainian minority children. The school in the Warsaw suburbs

mainly welcomed students from Asiatic countries. In Warsaw, one of the schools was situated in the city center and welcomed students from different countries. The second was located far away from the city center in the industrial section of one of Warsaw's districts. This school was located in a poverty-stricken area and had many low-income parents, both Polish and non-Polish. A center for asylum-seeking single women with children was next to the school. The sixth school was in the countryside, far away from any town, in a small village near the one of the 11 centers for asylum seekers in Poland. The school had many years of experience with welcoming and teaching foreigners.

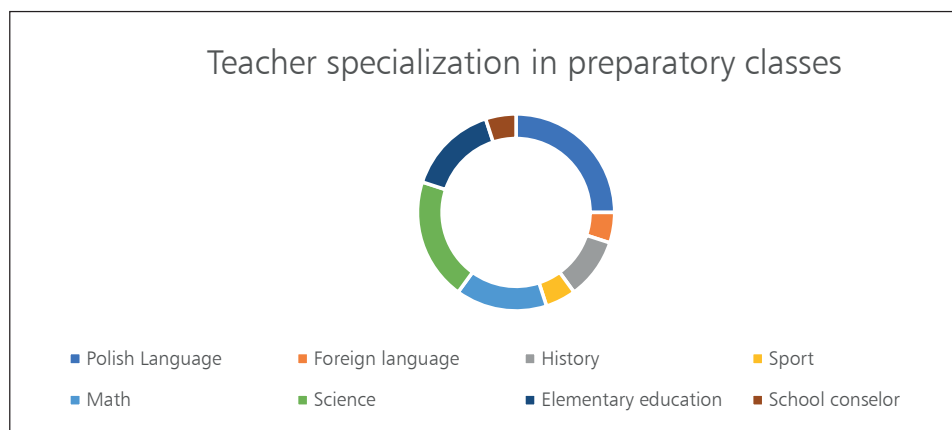
Participants

The participants in the survey were teachers from six public primary schools in which preparatory classes (*oddziały przygotowawcze*) were organized for the school year 2017/18. 20 primary teachers working in public education were interviewed and shared their practices and professional experience with the researcher. In the school year 2017/18, private schools were not allowed to organize preparatory classes; this only became possible after September 2020, when the school legislation changed.

18 women and 2 men took part in the survey; teaching in Poland is still predominantly a female profession. All the participants had full qualifications and a minimum of a master's degree to teach different subjects, including Polish, science, math, physical education, and others. In Poland, teachers who hold a higher education diploma (a Bachelor's or Master's degree) represent 98% of all teachers working in the school education sector (EURYDICE, FRSE, 2014). Participants' profile ranges are presented in Graph (1).

Graph 1

Areas of specialization of teachers in preparatory classes



Six teachers (30%) were beginners in the teaching profession and had limited professional experience. They were in their first to fifth year of teaching. Three teachers had worked at schools for five to fifteen years. Seven (35%) interviewed persons had 15 to 20 years of teaching experience. Four (20%) teachers had worked in the school system for over 20 years. These results are similar to overall Polish education statistics; the teaching force in Poland is older and has significant experience with teaching. The most common age of a Polish public-school teacher in 2017/18 was 43.9 years.⁴ Most of the teaching force in 2017/18 had the highest qualifications possible and achieved the highest degree of the teachers' professional promotion grade – 55.4% of teachers were chartered. Chartered teachers were the largest group represented in the survey as well. Only one teacher was a trainee (the first of the four grades in the teacher promotion system) and had been hired for a probation period (*staż*) in order to be promoted to a contract teacher after one year.

Teachers working in preparatory classes also had an interesting and relevant experience teaching abroad as Polish foreign language teachers or in an international context; four (20%) teachers worked in Polish schools and centers in eastern countries teaching Polish as foreign and heritage language, and one teacher had worked at an international school. Five (25%) teachers had completed post-diploma studies and were recognized as qualified lecturers of Polish as a foreign language.

Instruments

The study was a semi-structured interview that mainly consisted of open-ended questions based on topics that were crucial for understanding the organization and the problems in teaching preparatory classes. Questions were focused on teachers' competencies: knowledge and understanding, skills and dispositions, beliefs, attitudes, values, and commitment. Open-ended questions helped deliver more precise information about the teachers' experience, knowledge, skills, and practice, and allowed for the asking of follow-up questions in order to better understand the problem. The questionnaire involved 47 questions in 12 categories:

1. Teachers' profile (Q1–Q3) – teaching subject, professional experience, experience in teaching students with migrant backgrounds
2. Self-evaluation (Q4–Q6) – experience and knowledge needed for teaching students with migrant backgrounds in preparatory classes for newcomers before the preparatory class teaching
3. Opinion about the goals of preparatory classes for newcomers (Q7–Q9)
4. Students in preparatory classes for newcomers (Q10–Q12)

⁴ <https://www.prawo.pl/oswiata/zastepowalnosc-kadr-w-szkolach,497871.html>

5. Reflections on the organization of preparatory classes for newcomers (Q13–16)
6. Reflection about the process of teaching in preparatory classes for newcomers (Q17–Q23)
7. Organizational aspects of qualifications for preparatory classes for newcomers (Q24–Q26)
8. Students' integration into the Polish educational system (Q27–29)
9. Dispositions toward team-working, collaboration, and networking and collaborating with colleagues and parents (Q30–Q35)
10. The needs of and problems experienced by teachers working in preparatory classes for newcomers (Q36–Q43)
11. Reflections on the professional development of teachers working in preparatory classes for newcomers (Q44–46)
12. Documents (Q47)

Some additional questions were also asked based on information provided by the teachers during the interviews. Interviews lasted about 45–60 minutes, with one longer one at 90 minutes.

Data Collection

The interview process was conducted over four months of 2019, from May–June and again from September–October. The goal of the interviews was to explore the interviewees' points of view on teaching in preparatory classes for newcomers, particularly their professional experience with and feelings toward it.

20 interviewees were asked to participate in the survey in order to further explore their perspectives and obtain a more complete picture of opinions on the organization of preparatory classes and issues with working with students with migrant backgrounds in this class setting. Teachers were selected for the interview by the headmasters; most of the teachers working in preparatory classes were interviewed. The headmasters prepared the separate room for the survey to create good interview conditions. As Cohen et al. (2007) are keen to stress, "...the interview is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken, and heard."

All interviews were recorded, and all respondents were informed of the audio recording and approved it. At the beginning of the interview, its key components were presented: the aim of the research project, confidentiality issues, and an explanation of how the interview would be conducted. At the end of the interview, participants were provided with an opportunity to offer additional comments. The interview was transcribed for data analysis. The data was analyzed with ATLAS.ti software, the primary tool for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio, and video data.

Results

To assess teachers' professional knowledge and competence in terms of working with students with migrant backgrounds, we grouped the data using [ATLAS.ti](#) into three multicategories: 1. Teachers' feelings of preparedness for teaching preparatory classes 2. Self-confidence of teachers regarding teaching preparatory classes and their skills and abilities 3. Teachers' feelings of self-efficacy when teaching students with a migrant background.

Teachers' feelings of preparedness for teaching preparatory classes

According to the results, teachers do not feel ready to teach in preparatory classes. All teachers expressed the uncertainty they felt when they began their work, the lack of preparation to work in preparatory classes:

In fact, it was a deep dive. (D3)

It was literally "working on a living organism". (D6)

I was prepared to teach history, but not prepared to teach students who do not speak Polish, do not understand Polish. It was a huge barrier. (D14)

The first year was the hardest. After the first year, we developed some concepts with the other teachers. (D20)

Some of them learned from practice how to teach in this new context, how to scaffold for new learning and building new approaches, and how to differentiate instruction and build on students' knowledge and skills with experience.

We have to deliver the curriculum, so I use the trial and error method, I try to explain the words, I show the process and I present the pictures to illustrate it, to help them to understand (...) In natural sciences students have to learn a lot of new vocabulary and concepts. I saw that the students need for example definitions adapted to their language competences so I try to prepare my classes to that. (D15)

I observe my practice and I see that teaching these children is about going back and forth over and over again (D4)

Some teachers actively adjusted their practice to the students' possibilities. They learned how to teach in preparatory classes following the advice of the school headmaster or the preparatory classes group leader designed by the school headmaster.

The headmaster tried to explain us how to work in preparatory classes but in these classes we had new students every 1,5 months so we had the opportunity to adjust the practice, to change something. (D11)

One teacher even decided to learn Russian to better communicate with students:

I prepared materials once I had learned to use their alphabet, I prepared Polish- Russian "dictionaries", especially for more difficult vocabulary. I try to do so. I already have a base of prepared materials. (D6)

For example, I ask a question. If I see that they understand, then, for example, we throw a ball to each other and we look for the correct answer (...) it works. (D8)

This attitude helps teachers meet their students where they are and build up students' skills and knowledge more efficiently.

Most of the teachers learned from practice and most of them did not declare any autonomous activities to develop the competencies in teaching students with migrant background. Only three interviewed teachers declared that they had tried to understand how to teach better in preparatory classes. One teacher teaching natural sciences decided to follow the post-diploma studies.

Some teachers had a hard time working with a multicultural and multilevel class while attempting to follow a set curriculum. The obligation to apply the standards of mainstream classes to newly arrived children seemed unrealistic for most teachers:

Not all teachers are well prepared to work in preparatory classes (D6)

I am doing well because I am prepared to teach Polish as a foreign language, but other teachers often have many problems. (D1)

Many teachers did not understand the need to use culturally responsive pedagogy, which is a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world. In this approach it is important to have positive perspectives on parents and families, to communicate high expectations, to create the learning environment within the context of culture, to construct culturally mediated instruction, to reshape the curriculum and to keep the position of teacher as facilitator of learning process. Interviewed teachers tried to adapt their previous experience to the new context, but only a few declared a willingness to participate in professional development training, to study and learn about teaching students with migrant background. They have little knowledge of migration problems or second language acquisition:

...such children should be [in PC] at least three months and no more. [...]they stay in their group for too long (...). Maybe if they were linguistically mixed it would be different. However, here, up to a certain point, they learned basic Polish and then they stopped because they spent breaks with Ukrainian friends. They spoke Ukrainian; there is no assimilation with Polish students. (D3)

Because even if they have a glossary (...), they remember the words during one lesson, but in the next lesson, you have to start over. I don't know if it's a phenomenon linked to learning a new language, but it happens very often. I explain something in one

lesson, they understand. I check that they understood. (...) Next lesson, we have to do the same – they don't remember. (D3)

It is possible that the interviewed teachers, like the Polish teachers who took part in the OECD TALIS 2013 survey, would “appreciate the benefits of participation in different forms of professional development; however, their evaluation of the impact on their teaching is rather modest.” Also “Many teachers in Poland indicated that barriers included high costs (53%, TALIS average 44%), the lack of relevant professional development (47%, TALIS average 39%), and a lack of incentives (39%, TALIS average 48%). Certainly Polish education is in crisis and teachers in fragile and crisis contexts face enormous barriers to quality professional development. As Wiśniewski and Zahorska put it in, the 2015 “The new “Law on Education” demolished the school system by introducing change without proper infrastructure. Curricula, textbooks, and manuals were written in haste, and the new curriculum no longer integrated the learning of several subject fields at a time. (...) That reform (of 2017) was not rooted in evidence-based research and policy, but was a reaction to collective public opinion that schools were not working properly. Teachers universally perceived this as a negative evaluation of their work and the many years they had dedicated to improving the quality of education. The subsequent disbanding of teacher teams at lower secondary schools discounted their valuable achievements and severed local social capital.” (Wiśniewski, Zahorska 2020:183).

Self-confidence and self-efficacy of teachers regarding teaching preparatory classes and their skills and abilities

Teachers are confident when they had realistic expectations and goals and communicated assertively and when they have sufficient trust in their abilities to promote students' learning.

Most teachers felt that they had the skill and abilities required to teach preparatory classes.

If it had been my first year, it would have been very difficult for me. But, due to the fact that I have worked here at school for a few years, I already know what is most important, and it is easier for me to simply choose the most important things for them. (D6)

I had to prepare every lesson using a dictionary (...) they have Polish textbooks and exercises. I make selections anyway, because they are not able to do it. In fact, you have to prepare a special worksheet for each lesson. (D3)

I was trying to adapt the learning process to their needs and make some lessons fun so that they would learn something. I think I achieved good results. (D6)

Teachers sought efficient teaching strategies based on the children's previous experiences, cultures, and language. Some of them supported these students in their language acquisition and integration in Polish school with a few simple strategies: they use some "foreign" tools for example diaries as they were used to have in the country of origin, they check comprehension frequently – this is a useful strategy because it reduces the anxiety that Polish language learners often feel at school, they create a supportive environment which is also about cultivating an appreciation of diversity.

I introduced "Ukrainian diaries" to them. They write down homework and important information. And it was quite efficient. (D9)

Because I teach them Polish, of course, but also mathematics. I check their understanding of words and sentences in mathematics. (D18)

And she (Cultural Assistant) recently asked me, "How you do it so that these kids are entering this school so smoothly?" I don't know how I do it. I was even surprised that she noticed that these children smoothly entering regular classes they are just ready. (D11)

The interviewed teachers became increasingly confident about their teaching in preparatory classes over time.

I use more games to teach them different sport instructions and activities and after 2 months they understand what they have to do. (D2)

I was not prepared to teach in preparatory classes, at the beginning it was a very big challenge for me, but now I feel more confident, I feel like it's not bad.... (D15)

Another problem emphasized by teachers was the obligation to implement the same recommended curriculum in the preparatory classes as in the regular ones. Recommended curricula contain policy recommendations, lists of goals, suggested graduation requirements, and general recommendations about the content. Teachers can adapt the method of teaching and strategies to their special needs but cannot adapt the content. A second problem linked to the recommended curriculum is that one preparatory class can be organized for children of different ages and stages (e.g. children qualifying to classes I to III or IV-VI of primary school can be grouped together in one preparatory class).

Teaching three stages in the same class, teaching a multi-level class, follow three curriculum – it is unrealistic (D9)

With three stages in one class, I am not able to introduce and listen to everyone. (D3)

It means that a teacher may be obliged to implement the curriculum for even three classes at once. Interviewed teachers declared that they lack the ability to differentiate teaching and offer students adapted pathways to academic success in such contexts.

Discussion

Teachers' feelings of preparedness

This study found that most teachers working in preparatory classes when the program began felt unprepared to work in this specific educational context. They had little or no experience teaching students who were beginners in Polish. They knew how to teach mainstream classes, but this experience was completely new for them. They could not use an "immigrant blind" approach, which is very common in inception classes. In preparatory classes, there are only immigrant students; their needs and struggles cannot be ignored. Teachers must learn how to teach Polish language learners and could benefit from professional experience in the knowledge and skills specific to the context of working with these students. Teachers have learned how to organize their lessons and what strategies use to help their students use their previous educational experience, motivation, and curiosity.

According to educational research, teachers' feelings on their preparation get better when they believe their students are competent and can achieve excellence (Biesta, 2015; Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). The research of Ladson-Billings shows that culturally relevant teaching is not a matter of race, gender, or teaching style. What matters most in students' achievement is a teacher's efforts to work with the unique strengths a child brings to the classroom. She also stressed that inadequate preparation can create a cultural gap between teachers and students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In her study, most of the teachers believed that their students are competent and can achieve excellent results; they tried to build students' competencies based on their strengths.

Teachers' feelings of preparedness also depend on appropriate administrative support (Bancroft, 2008). Previous research has shown that Polish headmasters do not support the teachers working with students with migrant backgrounds (Błęszyńska, 2010). The interviews with teachers in this study paint a staggered picture of how headmasters support teachers in preparatory classes. The school principals saw the need to support students from migrant backgrounds and thus initiated the openings of preparatory classes. After the opening of the preparatory classes, most principals provided teachers with organizational and substantive support. Many interviewed teachers indicated the headmaster was a person to whom they could turn for help and advice. They also negotiated with local governments to find the financing for preparatory classes, assistants. Some of them found cooperation with non-governmental organizations to organize the trainings for teachers and support for migrant students. The headmasters generally make the teachers responsible for determining how goals should be reached; they provide direction and autonomy to teachers but also organize teacher training courses and hire cultural assistants.

Self-confidence and self-efficacy of teachers regarding teaching preparatory classes and their skills and abilities

Bandura defined self-efficacy as a person's judgment of his or her capability to perform a particular task. Self-efficacy statements are commonly preceded with phrases like, "I can," or, "I cannot," (Bandura, 1977). In this study we decided to focus on the teachers' self-confidence and self-efficacy of teachers following their capability to perform a particular task: to define and explain the goals of learning to the students, to prepare well-structured lessons, and management of the actual teaching. We wanted to see how they expose students to multiple opportunities to encounter, engage with, and elaborate on new knowledge and skills and use different strategies to extend the knowledge and skills.

Learning goals

Research has shown that goals are important for enhancing the performance of students; this is also true for preparatory classes. It is important to set challenging goals rather than 'do your best' goals (Hattie, 2009). Lesson goals should always explain what students need to understand and what they must be able to do. We found that most of the teachers we interviewed did not explain the learning goals to their students. We asked them how they worked with preparatory class students. Teachers reported on their experiences but not a single teacher mentioned informing students about the learning goals. They took a more traditional approach, where lessons begin with setting goals (in accordance with the work plan based on the curriculum), transfer the knowledge (explains new terms, rules, circumstances, etc.), and show opportunities for using the new knowledge (exercises, written work).

Structuring lessons

We asked teachers how they structured lessons, how they reinforced routines, and how they optimized time spent on tasks. According to the research of Kyriakides, Christoforou, and Charalambos, (2013) when lessons are structured by summarizing main points, gradually increasing the difficulty level, and connecting to previous lessons, students' learning is positively affected. In our study, teachers were focused on teaching new vocabulary and new structures; they certainly had routines but did not explain them explicitly in interviews. We noticed many contradictory opinions. Many of interviewed teachers, on the one hand, declared that they knew how to scaffold learning through specific activities and explained how they work, affirming that they were aware of the need to teach language skills across the curriculum. However, they also said that it was a challenge to teach language and content for many of them, declaring that they had not been prepared for that – they practiced and by doing, they gained experience through practice. In our opinion, preparato-

ry class teachers need training to teach more effectively, to understand the second language acquisition process better and to enhance their teaching competencies in teaching Polish language learners.

Some teachers had low reflective skills, or they did not dare talk about the problems. Getting information on their teaching and learning process was difficult. For that reason, it would be important to observe them actually teaching to look at the lesson structure and content to deepen the investigation.

Explicit teaching

The research shows that students are more confident and learn better when teachers adopt explicit teaching practices and demonstrate new content by modelling (Hattie, 2009). In the study, teachers discussed using examples to show students how to do activities; they prepared the activities to introduce new content and vocabulary, monitor students' work, and provide help when needed. We found that most of the teachers do not know the problems of second language learning. The second language teaching strategies are not in their "pedagogical repertoire". Some of them have unrealistic expectations about the time needed to be proficient in academic language. Many teachers believe that it does not take much, 2–3 months, to learn a language and to be ready to follow the courses in standard classes. Language teachers and elementary classes teachers understand the needs of this group of students better. But they also need further professional training.

Differentiated teaching

Some schools might not have the resources to place students from migrant backgrounds in an appropriate level. Instead, they place students of different ages in the same class – multi-level preparatory classes are the reality of many schools. A multi-level class poses many challenges, not only for the teacher. In this learning organization it's important to be able to teach various levels at once so that no student is lost or bored. Teachers need to be familiar with the curriculum for both grades and the variety of resources available in the school. In our study, none of the teachers said they were prepared for teaching in multi-level class.

Differentiated teaching is not only linked to teaching a multi-level class but also to the objective to build learning on the students' strengths to improve their performance and prepare them for mainstream classes. Teachers need to know how to respond to the diversity of a preparatory class; teaching in this context is different and it is impossible to use a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Teachers have to adapt the curriculum and be flexible because students' migrations do not take the school calendar into account.

In our study, teachers declared that they were trying to respect students' needs and possibilities by making many adjustments to content and the learning process to make lessons accessible for students who are not fluent in Polish. However, we have no data as to how they do so.

Conclusions and Implications

Investigating teachers' feelings of preparedness to teach in preparatory classes, how confident they feel about teaching these classes, and their self-efficacy regarding teaching these classes is crucial for improving teaching practices and the professional development of teachers working with students from migrant backgrounds in the context of preparatory classes. Equal, inclusive education for immigrants enhances social inclusion and offers better access to the job market.

Teachers need knowledge on the basic problems of language acquisition as well as skills in second language teaching. This suggests that professional development training should focus on these aspects of working with students from migrant backgrounds. In preparatory classes, all teachers are Polish language teachers, and they need to be trained to do this job effectively. We also found that most of the teachers working in preparatory classes work like teachers in bilingual classes; they spend a lot of time preparing and adapting their content and teaching strategies. This should be noted accordingly by the educational governance; perhaps their teaching status should be changed – they could be treated the same as bilingual class teachers.

The study showed that the headmasters have a crucial role regarding inclusive practices and the organization of learning. Headmasters need professional development focused on the education of students from migrant backgrounds to better introduce culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools.

Future research should continue to take observations of teachers' practices into consideration to better understand the multidimensional process of teaching and learning in preparatory classes where students are Polish language learners.

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