

## School Staff Experiences of Intercultural Teaching in Kraków – A Contribution to the Discussion on Integration Practices

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The article is devoted to an evaluation of school staff teaching and education experiences in an intercultural environment. A part of the MiCREATE project is presented, consisting of forty four interviews and six focus group interviews with thirty-seven teachers and other school staff from educational institutions across Poland, and more consistently in Krakow. A brief overview of the findings is presented, focused on contemporary shortcomings in diversity teaching, opportunities to enhance intercultural perspectives in education and child-centered approach. The findings are then compared with past and other existing studies to identify similarities and differences. This will be helpful in planning further research activities and shaping intercultural policy in Polish education.

**Keywords:** interculturalism, education, diversity, child-centrism, teaching practices, innovations in education, whole-child approach

This paper considers the results of interviews and focus groups conducted with teachers and other school staff within the MiCREATE (Migrant Children and Communities in Transforming Europe) research project.<sup>2</sup> All of the teachers who took part in the study were presented with and signed an informed consent declaration as part of the basic requirements of the project. All interviews and focus groups (except singular cases) were recorded upon consent and then transcribed. The data was coded and anonymized and is retained on a secured electronic storage medium. After the end of the

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project, all raw data from the MiCreate study will be available under open access rules but the data archive has not yet been defined.

Interviews conducted with teachers related to their experiences and views when working in an intercultural environment with foreign-born children. Their perception of the school's role in integration is discussed among other factors such as cultural habits, family relations and social status. The analysis is set in the context of the reform and evolution of the Polish educational system as well as the wave of migration that has been washing over Poland since 2014 and is still growing regardless of the Covid-19 epidemic. Online teaching experiences are presented only briefly as this requires more research which was not covered by the sample. The paper will focus on the differences and similarities of educator experiences in comparison to other research and past studies. The paper will consider the issues of a systemic gap in integration practices and include a discussion of the significance of an individual approach to foreign pupils as an important factor in the effectiveness of integration.

The objectives behind interviewing teachers and other school staff were to analyze the relationship between persons involved in the educational communities and migrant children. We ought to explore staff attitudes, their knowledge, perceptions and opinions regarding topics related to the dynamics and processes of the integration of migrant children while simultaneously evaluating the practices they implement to integrate migrant children in educational systems. These included the techniques and instructions they employ to address issues of intercultural co-existence and to organize cohesion in school life and the driving and hindering factors in the strategies used by educational staff to address cultural and religious diversity and promote resilience, avoid segregation and enhance children's skills and well-being. The final question related to the introduction of a child-centered approach around which the whole MiCREATE project had been organized.

The structure of the article has been constructed in a manner allowing the reader to grasp the principles of the research project, understand the methodology of the research and how it was done. It will begin with a presentation of the findings we collected and only in the end compare them with existing studies and theoretical frameworks since it will better reflect how the findings overlap with existing knowledge on teachers' preparedness to address migrant children needs.

## **Overview of the MiCREATE Research Project and its Methodological Approach**

As described in the project's proposal, the overall objective of the project was to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centered approach to their integration in relation to education and policy. The project aims at the comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes

of migrant children in order to empower them. It was particularly designed to identify existing measures for the integration of migrant children at the regional and local levels through secondary data analysis and then provide an analysis of the social impact of these integration programs through case studies in six countries through qualitative and quantitative child-centered research. In the analysis provided in this paper, the main objective was to gain comprehensive knowledge about the processes of integration in the educational environment in Poland, more precisely Kraków. The city is a representative sample of Polish migration patterns, with clusters of foreigners settling in large cities and its surroundings, regardless of whether this migration is temporary or permanent.

The study itself was conducted among teachers and other school staff in six carefully selected primary and secondary schools in Kraków, and preceded by more general interviews with school principals (and interviewees indicated by principals) in nine other schools located in different parts of Poland, between April 2019 and January 2020, with a special emphasis on examining the integration of these migration children in relation to diverse factors and variables, including age, gender, religion, ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic status.

The schools were selected using the project criteria but adjusted to local factors. In Krakow it was observed that despite the growing number of foreign students, their presence in most schools is dispersed. The data collected by the Krakow's Department of Education and included in Educational Information System (System Informacji Oświatowej) showed that number of foreign-born students had grown sixteen times in just five years (Bulandra, Kościółek, Majcher Legwicz, Pamuła-Bahrens, Szymańska 2019: 9). For that reason, Krakow can be partly considered as new immigrant destination. According to Winders such a destination is characterized by four factors: speed of newly arrived settlement, lack of institutional infrastructure, lack of "established ethnic resources" for immigrants and missing link between immigrants and local past (Winders, 2014). Indeed there are no specific rules referred to immigrant enrollment to the schools and at the time of the study Krakow had only mediocre experiences with organizing "preparatory classes". As per institutional rules, children are enrolled to schools in the area of their inhabitation. As there are no specific migrant districts in Krakow, it transpired that there was at least one migrant child in each city school yet no more than fifty foreign-born students were to be found in any of them. As this community is dispersed, we chose schools with an average number of migrant students (10–20) for the in depth study as we believed it would reflect the local situation in the best possible manner. They were nominated by the intercultural education expert with long-standing teaching experience in Poland, Portugal and Germany using the key related to school's existing policy covering predefined factors of an intercultural approach. Certain environmental factors prevailed when using different criteria in school selection for the foreign children enrolled. They were determined by the presence of an intercultural policy, engagement in international projects such

as Erasmus +, Comenius, MURAL or other relevant initiatives, having preparatory classes, hiring teachers of Polish as a foreign language, cultural assistants and mediators. After nomination, schools were approached by researchers who spoke with principals and agreed on the selection of teachers and school staff to be interviewed. Some of these selections were made after observation phases which had been other parts of the MiCREATE study. A semi-structured interview prepared by the University of Barcelona was used to collect samples. During the interviews and focus groups, teachers were asked about their experience of teaching and educating children from a migration background. This research aimed to improve the academic understanding of the child's experiences of life in a new social and cultural environment in terms of their arrival and stay in host societies as well as comparing them with a so-called adult perspective presented by the teachers in the interviews. This article discusses only the latter as the research with the children themselves is still ongoing. The interviews were also designed to examine the conceptualizations of well-being and whether it differs from what adults think is right and desirable. Teachers were asked about the shortcomings of integration practices delivered either by schools or other support services, to analyze the relationships between members in the educational community and migrant children, including educational staff attitudes, their knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and opinions regarding topics related to the dynamics and processes of the integration of migrant children.

Another important factor was to learn more about the practices that they implement to integrate migrant children in the educational system, especially how they apply intercultural education, address issues of intercultural co-existence and organize everyday school life. Teachers were also surveyed on the teaching materials and tools they use within or beyond the framework of the curriculum in reference to cultural, gender, and ethnic diversity. The research aimed to observe and assess educational staff approaches and educational community work on migrant children integration and assess how they comply with the principles of child-centered education. This concept was the most important methodological milestone for the researchers in the study. It is understood as creating space for children to increase self-learning, multiply social connections and communication skills in order to stimulate creativity. Several solutions are used in order to achieve these goals as providing a caring and supportive learning environment (Bansberg 2003), stimulating children from within (not extrinsically) (Lal 2014), active learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991), collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1984), inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991), problem-based learning, peer led team learning (Tien, Roth, & Kampmeier, 2001), team-based learning (Michaelson, Knight, & Fink, 2004), and peer instruction (Mazur, 1997) among others. In the interview outcomes section, a more thorough description of how this concept is followed by teachers will be provided, if it actually is at all.

Within the research project, forty-four teachers and other school staff (including librarians, pedagogical advisors, cultural assistants, janitors, secretaries and kitchen

staff) were studied using the structural interview method and thirty-seven more teachers took part in the focus groups on two research issues:

- how the educational community perceives the integration of migrant children, cultural and religious diversity, and
- identifying strengths and weaknesses of the policies and practices adopted by the educational community to address challenges related to the integration of migrant children integration.

The in-depth study was limited to three primary schools in Kraków, two secondary schools and one dormitory house which serves several secondary schools around Kraków. The 2018/2019 school year data from the System of Educational Information (pol. *System Informacji Oświatowej*) showed 447 public and private kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools including high schools, technical and vocational schools within the city limits of Kraków. 3,535 foreigners were enrolled for this particular school year. The average number of foreigners attending public schools in Kraków was between 5 and 15. Kraków has some non-public schools that host larger numbers of foreigners (60–110), but they were not included in the study as most of them were established to enroll foreigners only and sometimes lacked Polish students.

School Sample in the MiCREATE Study

|    | Type of School | Area/District   | Size of the School  | No. of migrant students | Additional info   |
|----|----------------|---|---------------------|-------------------------|---|
| S1 | Primary        | Sleeping/commercial/Academic/business innovation/ far from center   | Large (>500)        | >50                     | Provides support and programs for migrant children          |
| S2 | Primary        | Industrial/mixed social classes/ far from the center                | Large               | >20                     | Cultural assistants present                                 |
| S3 | Primary        | Industrial/mixed social classes/far from the center/ single houses  | Medium (<250)       | >15                     | Provides variety of supportive tools for migrant children   |
| S4 | Secondary      | City center/mixed socially/leisure/ green                           | Medium              | >20                     | Preparatory classes existing<br>Cultural assistants present |
| S5 | Secondary      | Industrial/mixed social classes/ far from the center/ single houses | Medium              | >10                     | Involved in international intercultural projects            |
| S6 | dormitory      |   | Inter-school, large | >50                     | Provides only extra-curricular education                    |

As already mentioned, only schools with an average number of foreigners were approached as they better represented the general situation in Poland in terms of intercultural education.

The first primary school was located in Ruczaj, a district which has dynamically transformed in the past twenty years from a plain and industrial area to the largest new neighborhood of the city. This area is increasingly preferred by Ukrainians as their place of residence, and also by other foreign workers of IT and BPO companies located within the district. The school is officially an integrative one enrolling children with disabilities and special educational needs. It offers individually adjusted didactics, including psychological and pedagogical support. For children with a migration background, it offers teaching Polish as a foreign language, also as extra-curricular activities, psychological counselling in Ukrainian and the assistance of cultural mediators. This is also the only school in Kraków where the number of foreigners exceeded 50 children, however, taking into account the total number of pupils, which was close to one thousand, the number of migrant children is still only a marginal part of the community. The school cooperates with Ukrainian migrant associations.

The second primary school was located in the older part of Prokocim district. The school offers classes in Polish and the support of cultural assistants for migrant children. Most are again Ukrainian, but there are also some EU citizens, mainly from Belgium and Italy.

The last primary school was also located in the Prokocim district. This school has a long tradition of accepting and teaching migrant children with growing numbers in recent years. The neighborhood is increasingly chosen by migrants due to its quietness, family-friendly infrastructure, commuting connections with the city center, and low housing rates. The school is engaged in multiple international projects including MURAL (Mutual Understanding, Respect and Learning), which has been recognized as good integrative practice. Polish as a foreign language classes are also offered.

Among the secondary schools, the first is located within the inner city center in the old district of Salwator, along the north bank of the Vistula. In 2016, this school was acknowledged by the Educational Department of the City Hall as Kraków's multicultural school. Since then, until the end of the 2018/2019 school year, it has been received special regular support from the city's consultant for intercultural issues. This has resulted in hiring intercultural assistants and opening the first preparatory class in Kraków. Among the migrants attending there are Ukrainians, Venezuelans, Brazilians and Vietnamese. The school is engaged in the European Solidarity Corps Program hosting voluntary workers from all nations. It also organizes professional practices for the beneficiaries of the CEMEA Centre-Val de Loire. The second high school is located in Prokocim, in the same building as the previously-mentioned primary school. It is often chosen by migrant children who continue their education after completing primary education or those who reside in the area. The school community here is characterized by greater diversity. Several students are Vietnamese due

to the proximity of the “King Square” commercial area where many businesses of migrants from Vietnam are located. The school was involved in two Comenius and two Erasmus + international projects.

Finally, the last educational institution where our research took place was a dormitory house for teenagers attending different secondary schools in Kraków. It includes both Polish and migrant children, among whom only Ukrainians were present. It is part of a larger network of dormitory houses in Kraków. Most of children residing there were unaccompanied by parents who were abroad. In the 2017/2018 school year, half of the children were migrants, and until the Covid-19 lockdown they amounted to one fifth of the community. At present, the dormitory is not accepting children due to pandemic restrictions. The dormitory is not a boarding school that provides regular classes, but a place of round-the-clock care and upbringing for its dwellers. It was chosen for the study to raise awareness of the presence of migrant children in Polish schools, and the lack of proper legal custody for such children, especially adolescent children.

## Outcome of Interviews<sup>3</sup>

Teachers and other school staff that were interviewed for the purposes of the project usually had a long history of teaching or working within the educational system, exceeding twenty or even thirty years of pedagogical experience. All of them had worked with or observed migrant children on a daily basis for a significant period of time. We concentrated our conversation on several issues related to intercultural education, managing school diversity, using pro-diversity teaching materials, the impact of presence of migrants on inter-school relations, the presence or absence of school reception policies, integration practices, a child-centered approach, the availability of training sessions raising intercultural competences, mapping the shortcomings and raising criticism of the present approach to migrant children. Our interviews focused on relations between the school and local community, with a particular emphasis on parental involvement. Teachers were also asked to describe their personal needs and desirable systemic solutions related to the assertion of child wellbeing and educational success and progress. It must be noted, however, that as the research plan was implemented in six European countries, mostly not as homogenous as Poland, the interviews collected here never related to more complex issues such as child identity transformation, the acknowledgment of his/her social background or the perception of interculturalism. Direct answers to such questions were often avoided or disregarded as irrelevant digressions.

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<sup>3</sup> The raw data of this study, including the interviews, will be available upon request through the INTERKULTURALNI PL Association ([biuro@interkulturalni.pl](mailto:biuro@interkulturalni.pl)), the project partner. After completion of the project, it will be archived for open access research and development.

Teachers in this study perceive integration practices as creating a space for peaceful coexistence and the avoidance of peer conflict. This should be based on tolerance, the eradication of prejudice and treating each other equally. Most teachers, however, do not see these factors as an enhancement for any pro-integrative action but rather as the basis for fair and just treatment of all pupils within the school community. In this context, however, it is worth noting that all interviewed teachers and other school staff had a positive attitude towards foreign-born children and presented a supportive approach. They were extremely open to learning, taking into account also the cultural dimension of this process and they did not seem to pressure anyone to assimilate. Having also the will to teach Polish traditions and customs, they always respected the diversity of children and their own cultural background. Some even highlighted the fact that many of these children tended to assimilate themselves and perceived this as a negative aspect of migration.

Greater school diversity, the merging of different cultures and teaching all pupils in the school about community openness, compromise and having a greater sensitivity to others is seen as an asset. Teachers also noticed that migrant children tend to be more focused on learning and social interactions, which is positive both for educational achievement and the development of school communities. Some opinions were, however, somewhat confusing. Many teachers saw language proficiency as the only barrier to successful integration and were convinced that at a certain level of language proficiency on the part of pupils, integration becomes a spontaneous and independent process, irrelevant of any empowerment activities.

*If a child is alone and not really coping with the Polish language I can notice this uncertainty, shyness, this child is sitting in the corner, browsing books, then I pay attention to them, talk to them as much as I can. – S2E2*

Nevertheless, teachers are satisfied that schools more frequently provide informative tools that help migrant children and their parents in the process of enrolment and more general participation in the life of the school. This often allows them to overcome the language barrier that, as previously mentioned, is seen as the fundamental problem of foreign-born children in the school.

*What I stress when I chat with other teachers is that knowing Polish is the key to understanding the surrounding world, it is crucial for the knowledge and skills of those children. If you ask a child about something and they do not respond, it obviously doesn't mean that they don't know the answer. It just means they don't this tool, this code, which allows them to communicate. – S3T3*

Based on our interviews, we also concluded that teachers in schools with higher migration rates better value foreigners' achievement and see fewer problems relating to their presence in the school community. After all, the presence of foreign-born



children does not seem to be problematic, but often leads to the lack of acknowledgment of such pupils and no reflection over their identity. As a result, the needs of such children are fulfilled only in the context of class participation. Here, most respondents highlighted the difficulties in finding a balance between the necessity of supporting migrant pupils in their tasks and not neglecting Polish children in the course of learning. It is important to understand that there is almost no space left for multicultural content or an integrative approach in the school curriculum.

There are not many teaching tools that could support teachers in the classroom. Most respondents recall that over the past decade they participated in multicultural and diversity training sessions which were then popular, helping them feel competent enough in this field, and that they did not need to attend follow-up training sessions. They observed a lack of previously planned and more regular integration programs in schools. They also discussed the fact that there is no vision to support such initiatives at the level of the Ministry of Education, so integration efforts take place only occasionally, sometimes happening when attached to certain celebrations. Most of them are folk-like which does not support real-life adaptation to a new environment. There is no clear legal path to organize such events, so they are usually organized as part of the prevention and upbringing plan that each school is obliged to adapt. This is still seen as insufficient especially if it represents only the action within the classroom framework. Teachers believe that there should be role-play classes where children can go to markets, bakeries or other real-life settings so learning becomes a real-life experience. However, a shortage of time and an overloaded curriculum is blamed for a lack of efficient integration planning.

*We have ideas on integrative actions but just lack time. I would like to remind you that we need to teach first of all, knowledge is our goal, so joining some big integration programs is just too much. – S1T1*

There are also some teachers that do not see the sense in creating integration initiatives and prefer to rely on an individual approach to each child in school.

*I personally think that individual contact is crucial, even with the language barrier. I repeatedly saw that those children had no idea what I was talking about, but only the fact I came, can see what they are watching, what they are interested in, what they are preparing – this is important for them. They need attention. – S6T2*

Those teachers had the impression of being neglected in the process of creating integration programs that are sometimes enforced in schools by external stakeholders.

*We need workshops with real people having real life experiences, not theoretical ones. Theory is always nice but here it must be practical, adjusted to a certain school, but of course there is no money for it, for nothing. Of course they will tell us that we can do this*

*or that or anything... Well I can be a volunteer for the weekend. But being mean, I may ask such a person if they do such voluntary work? – S4T3F*

As a result, most of the schools of our respondents are predominantly introducing solutions that are clearly included in educational law as supporting measures for non-Polish citizens. These are mainly additional language classes and compensatory lessons for different subjects, which are perceived as genuinely helpful and supportive for newly arrived children. Another important form of support comes with the employment of cultural assistants. Teachers believe they are extremely helpful in keeping up with requirements, but also as part of the communication chain with parents. They appreciated this latter function as enabling the avoidance of translation by children themselves. On the other hand, teachers complained that the duties and professional position of assistants is unclear, their contracts are strictly linked to the presence of migrant children so this profession is too unstable to become a fixed component of the school environment. Another way of coping with the presence of migrant children in the school was to group such children according to their ethnic or national similarities. Teachers were ambivalent to such practices and one school did not follow this but took into account the best interests of the child as a general prerequisite of its approach. They underpin multiculturalism in classes with more diverse inclusion which serves the purpose of maintaining ongoing relations with Polish peers. Nevertheless, these teachers also emphasized that the process of placing students in certain classes is the most important part of the integration process and sometimes required several interviews with the pupil in question, but also revision during the course of the school year. This is linked to the correct assessment of the skills and knowledge of pupils with a migration background. It was observed that Polish requirements at certain ages are much more advanced than those in other countries which cause multiple problems with keeping up with the curriculum.

There is also a clearly discernible problem concerning the discrepancy between the language of communication and the language of instruction, which must be acquired in order to participate in classes. With a lack of clear solutions to these problems, foreign-born children are not secured against failure or flunking a class. A response to these issues may be preparatory classes where migrant children can learn the new language and simultaneously also other curriculum subjects. Our respondents developed many ideas concerning the language performance of pupils including allowing pupils to write exams in a foreign language known to teacher (e.g. English) or not grading pupils in the first term of school. Some teachers also simplify the language of instruction to allow migrant children to better understand content, but at the same time complained that their colleagues were reluctant to do the same. In Poland this is a considerable problem as the grammar of the language has a tendency to rely on complex, compound sentences which are often not properly understood by foreigners.

*Teachers cannot transform the content in the language of instruction to simple spoken language. We build compound sentences, multiply compound ones, which makes those children dazed and confused, they do not understand, cannot draw out important information. – S3T2F*

Integration is often the subject of cooperation between school and non-governmental organizations. Their supportive presence in the school is generally acclaimed, especially on the axis of communication with parents and cultural customization, which is perceived as much more difficult if parents are not involved. Teachers noticed, however, that sometimes the activity of parents could be counter-productive, but this refers most often to Polish parents who focus on their ambitions to preserve overall school performance at the highest possible level. Such situations are rare and usually contradict previously introduced multicultural school policies.

*Well, the family may decide that children will be learning, working, developing or may not. The success is reached by those children, whose parents, sometimes against their patriotic beliefs, are feeling that their children must integrate with a place of their arrival. If they are blocked it is immediately transferred to children. And those children are allowed to not integrate in the Polish school. – S1T2F*

The MiCREATE project is built around the principle of a child-centered approach. With this in mind, the MiCREATE teams were focused on identifying such factors within the approaches of responding teachers. In Polish schools such a paradigm was almost non-existent. Polish schools are built on very traditional education schemes, refractory not innovatory. Dormitory houses are different and are managed by children-appointed councils who collaborate with adults in the most important aspects of their operations. To some extent most teachers were also open to pupil initiatives that reflected their talents or presenting their cultural heritage in the classroom or to a larger school forum. Apart from this, Polish schools are seen as not ready for a child-centered approach or for hearing children's voices.

Despite the broad accessibility of learning materials with intercultural or diversity teaching content, such materials were rarely used by our respondents, with the exception of materials for learning Polish as a foreign language. Teachers who had the opportunity to use such learning tools in their classrooms obtained them through their own effort, often exchanging opinions and seeking advice through social media. Increasing competences through workshops and dedicated training sessions is currently rare, as previously mentioned. Teachers observed that such training sessions are time-consuming but not beneficial to their career or professional promotion. In this regard, they often identified past-acquired competences as helping them deal with migrant children. For example, most of the project's respondents were forced to learn Russian either at school or during studies and this almost forgotten skill often improved communication with children arriving from countries where Russian

is known and spoken. Other solutions of possible problems are acquired ad hoc by searching for them online or consulting with psychological or pedagogical centers. Once again, the presence of cultural assistants was perceived as an asset.

In the part of the interview that focused on the obstacles, difficulties, and shortcomings of the Polish educational system in terms of the acceptance of migrant children, respondents agreed about the general lack of action that would structurally and permanently foster the adaptation process. Children once enrolled to school are thrown in at the deep end and only after some time might get a helping hand. The presence of foreign-born children may also cause peer tension as they are seen as being treated more leniently by teachers. This matter seems to be still unresolved as teachers do not have time for upbringing and the conciliation of relations within the classroom. The constant lack of resources makes limited integration actions less effective and sometime counter-productive. Respondents made it clear when referencing additional language classes in criticizing the fact that children of different language abilities were often grouped together.

This structural problem overlaps with the personal difficulties migrant children experience that includes a lack of personal stability, future plans and no anchoring in the new environment. The feeling of instability experienced in their families is demotivating for school progress and language learning. Hence, interventions in relations between the school and the parents of the child becomes a crucial part of the integration process. Unfortunately, our respondents see Ukrainian parents as passive, withdrawn and fearing contact with the school. Some made the assumption about a difference in their cultural approach to institutions, others blamed the language barrier. The instability and homesickness felt by children and facilitated by their parents sometimes led to depression. Polish teachers could rarely do anything about it except general support and compassion. Another significant problem observed by our respondents was the discontinuation of schooling, which forfeited integration efforts. Children were known to vanish from school without warning, leaving not only teachers without any knowledge of their whereabouts but it also impacted peers who often suffer when losing a friend. Inter-peer integration is also a major issue as it often fails because larger groups of foreigners tend to stick together, and integrative actions performed by migrant associations exclude Polish children from organized events. Thankfully, teachers rarely observed conflict between children based on their cultural background. Differences between the Slavic nations are minor and typically do not cause a great deal of tension. Any crisis in terms of the integration process is often caused by a lack of proper planning, a lack of time, and resources necessary to implement necessary action. Teachers are overloaded with their regular duties and have no opportunity to concentrate on children with special needs. Even if there are great ideas or projects, the structural problems of the educational system negates the possibility for their implementation. There were also specific problems identified.

**230** Most children living in dormitories were not under the supervision of parents who

live abroad or in distant parts of Poland. No legal custodian had been established for them in line with Polish family law. These children are usually under the care of contractual custodians who treat care as a business-like issue, sometimes with a few dozen children under their supervision. For that reason, real responsibility for the child is blurred. Teachers often do not know if the minor might be left alone outside the dormitory for shopping or leisure, and they have real problems cooperating with such custodians who often act irresponsibly or are perceived as unprepared to take care of children. In some cases, they see this as a human trafficking issue. There are currently no provisions for tackling the emotional, health or social needs of migrant children.

Many shortcomings were discussed during the interviews with teachers and the research team asked the respondents for solutions, tools and the necessary action that needs to be taken in order to improve the situation. The most frequent answers addressed the teaching component of the education system as the leading issue in the successful adaptation of migrant children into the Polish school environment. There should be more hours of language learning and compensatory lessons introduced, as this allows a more individual approach and increases the chances of educational success. In addition, a learning methodology allowing more teamwork in mixed groups rather than sticking formally to the curriculum could also be introduced. Teachers acknowledging the work of cultural assistants see them more in the role of social and environmental mediators working with families and other supportive institutions. Another important factor is improving teacher competences, especially linguistic ones, so that teachers could at least have a communicative knowledge of the migrant child's mother tongue.

*For sure there is a need to introduce intercultural issues to teacher education programs. Not only psychologists, pedagogues, but all future teachers, regardless of their subjects, as all of them will have to face this challenge. – S1R1*

Some teachers also postulated structural developments, including a city learning platform accessible for foreigners in their own native languages, containing useful information relating to education and integrating into the local community. Such a platform would also serve as a problem solving and communication tool. Our respondents believe that migrant children should start school a year earlier with orientation camps and other preparatory courses. These events should also include their parents who would become familiar with the school and its community. The learning process could be extended to extra-curricular activities, and migrant children could be empowered to talk about their cultural background and customs. Finally, the school should employ more expert staff, including psychologists, pedagogical advisors and cultural mediators whose task it would be to improve active participation in peer relation management. Intercultural elements should also become part of the curriculum as well as professional teaching studies.

## Discussion

The results of our interviews are partly coherent with other studies relating to teacher competences, intercultural skills and their knowledge about integration practices, but to some extent they both differ from previous research and shed new light on the shortcomings of the Polish educational system. Some problems revealed in the interviews had never been disputed in the literature beforehand.

The integration process portrayed by teachers is closest to the one described as engagement with the new culture whilst maintaining the old one (O'Toole, Thommessen, Todd 2018). Teachers even insisted on something we might call a hybrid identity (Calderon, Lynn 2019). According to this study, a hybrid identity that adopts new cultural patterns to the primal cultural background is extremely helpful in anchoring during the process of integration. We noticed that the interviewed teachers shared this approach whilst foreseeing great problems in losing one's primal identity, especially if the migration experience is something temporary and a return to the country of birth is expected. This attitude can be acclaimed as it is respectful to the pupil's autonomy and is not so common within EU countries. Teachers dealing with Muslim immigrants in Belgium saw cultural maintenance as a threat to integration, even though its judgment relied on stereotyping and defending their own identity (Van Praag et al 2016). The recognized perception of the integration process within our respondents' answers matches Grzymała-Kazłowska's concept of social anchoring, where children become attached to certain social anchors represented in different spheres of life such as education, leisure, food, family, religion, literature, street-life and others (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2018). In our initial report, we asked the question of when teachers should intervene when some elements of identity are heading towards the socially undesirable? (Arun, Bailey 2019: 6). This question reveals a whole spectrum of discussed issues about the failures of integration schemes, frameworks and plans. Many studies show that belonging to art-related communities strengthens the integration process and helps migrant children to adapt in new communities (Lewis, McLeod, Li 2018; Lundberg 2016; Quadros, Vu 2017; Balfour, Bundy, Burton, Dunn, Woodrow 2015; Rothchild 2015). Our respondents did not expressly name the fruitfulness of such activities, however, we noticed that hard-working and talented children from migrant communities have an indisputable impact on class and school society, and the expression of artistic talents help them in terms of accommodation. They also agreed that such expressions are generally supported by school institutions. It is an important contribution to the child-centered approach that shall develop further. The same conclusion comes with the cultural assistant phenomenon. Also, recent studies show that social work is highly valued in reference to integration, not only as a service provision or giving pupils orientation but also as a key to developing group relations and their dynamics. This is particularly important in terms of empowerment and building bridges between migrant background and

the mainstream culture (Viola, Biondo, Mosso 2018:483). There is evidence proving that the engagement of migrants themselves gives advantage to the integration processes that take place within the newly arrived communities (Lin, Wiley 2017). The involvement of cultural assistants serves all these issues. Their presence in Polish schools is a relatively new phenomenon that is not widely recognized or operationalized in the research. Most papers discuss their work in reference to refugees and asylum seekers, overcoming their input to work with regular migrants. Those studies maintain that such an institution is underdeveloped and not widespread but mostly efficient (Klorek, Kubin 2012:39,185–232; Chrzanowska, Jachimczak 2018:96). It had also been agreed that inadequate grouping or class assignment might retard the educational progression of migrant children (Młynarczuk-Skołowska, Szostak-Król: 126–127).

These results are coherent with our own findings. The process of a child's enrollment in a school and appropriate assignment to a class is the first stage of cooperation between school and parents. Our study showed many problems arising from this participation, including poor language communication, parental custody absence, poor school involvement of parents, or different expectations and prejudices of local children and parents. All these problems were also revealed in previous studies (Górska 2011:22). However, we identified a relatively new phenomenon related to this issue concerning the problem of the guardianship of children in the absence of their parents. This problem was particularly emphasized by our respondents who found it to be one of the most significant in terms of integration and teaching in the intercultural environment. This relates mostly to children boarded in dormitories and coming from Ukraine, Belarus and other post-Soviet countries. As previously mentioned, many are under the custody of so-called contractual custodians who do not have any legal responsibility under the national law. Some of them have too many children to supervise, others are unprepared to fulfil the obligation due to their young age and lack of experience. It was observed that children under such care are neglected, do not have adequate accommodation in mid-term and summer holidays, nor is appropriate health care secured. In extreme cases, sexual abuse or underage pregnancy were identified. Polish officials seem to ignore this problem, and teachers felt abandoned in solving all these related issues. They demanded the amendment of educational law so only children with parents present or legal guardians that are properly assigned could be enrolled in Polish schools.

In order to overcome all these problems, we need to realize that parents are an important chain in the process of adaptation and an ally for teachers in providing far-reaching and diverse support for children ranging from inter-generational dialogue to extra-curricular activities management (Moskal, Sime 2016; Rerak-Zampou 2014). Although this issue was highlighted by teachers in the interviews, a broader perspective based on the interviews with children as this part of study was postponed due to Covid-19 pandemics and is still in progress. This issue is also intertwined with

the possible development of the cultural assistance profession as a general social worker and could also contribute to building a more comprehensive and efficient structure for social services covering all aspects of the functioning of migrant children in a new social environment. The high competences of teachers becomes a crucial asset here. Contrary to previous findings (Pamuła-Behrens, Hannel-Brzozowska 2010; Błęszyńska 2010; Butarewicz-Głowacka 2015, Szybura 2016; Pamuła-Behrens, Szymańska 2017; Hajduk-Gawron 2018; Majcher-Legawiec 2017) where the unpreparedness of teaching migrant children was commonly identified, our respondents felt competent enough to deal with all problems related to teaching in an intercultural environment every time they have access to the relevant resources. This result is different and relatively new when compares to past research. It might be assumed that respondents in the MiCREATE study had long-lasting teaching careers in schools where migrants had been present for many years and lived in cities that was always attached to the principle of multiculturalism. On the other hand, in one of the most recent surveys undertaken by Szymańska and Pamuła-Bahrens with a large cohort of teachers from Kraków schools, teachers felt anxious regarding intercultural teaching and diversity management in the classroom (Bulandra, Kościółek, Majcher Legawiec, Pamuła-Bahrens, Szymańska 2019: 35–54). There is certainly a lack of institutional pressure on teachers gaining such competences despite the growing demand which is a consequence of rapidly increasing migration rates.

Between 2012 and 2019 the number of migrant children attending Krakow's schools increased sixteen fold. It would be much appreciated if the structural constraints to raising the intercultural competences of teachers were removed, especially since many local governments are investing their resources in this field by offering the reimbursement of the costs of additional studies that provide new knowledge on diversity, other cultures and tolerance. Such studies are not popular among teachers due to the structural frameworks of work organizations. Until this changes, integration opportunities available in schools for migrant children will be dependent on individual teacher devotion and self-awareness about the need to pursue the acquisition of competences and their personal need for self-development (Guskey 2000:16; Day 2004: 17–18; Budzeń 2009: 17–18; Szempruch, Blachnik-Gęsiarz 2010:57–58). It seems that teachers involved in our research can be defined by these features and for that reason are able to contribute to the development of good practices in intercultural education. They also serve as an example of good teaching, open to diversity based on tolerance. This is extremely important in the adaptation process as such an approach to teaching lower prejudices and opens children to critical thinking and evokes empathy (Priest et al. 2014; Vizintin 2013; Triliva et al. 2014; Kralj, Zakelj, Ramesa 2013; Panichella, Ambrosini 2018).



## Conclusion

The MiCREATE study certainly does not mirror the reality of Polish schools, mainly due to the small sample of staff interviewed. However, the outcome of these interviews is much more optimistic. Many of the previously experienced problems are being resolved, teachers seem to be more confident in teaching children from a migration background and the general attitude has become positive and caring. Regardless of the effort of teachers to pay attention to specific problems of children from a migration background, Polish education is still experiencing structural obstacles which weakens its potential to do things better and more efficiently. Eliminating these shortcomings and reforming the educational system are at present the most important actions that need to be imposed. In schools charged with taking care of each and every child, if we could enhance teamwork, use an individual approach and give teachers space for innovation and creativity, Polish teachers as educators and sources of social influence would be better prepared for diversity management and making the school environment more welcoming for foreign-born children. Nevertheless, even the state of art review of the existing literature does not provide a clear answer as to what solutions work best in integration efforts. Most of the studies here are focused on processes, transformations and practices with little emphasis given to measurable results and cross-cutting analysis is rare in this regard. The MiCREATE project aims to change this perspective by delivering consistent knowledge and also on the practical dimension in terms of available integration tools. It will give teachers space to experiment with practices and choose those that are most promising and effective in implementation.

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