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## **Educational needs of children with migration experience in terms of language development at their early childhood stage. Theoretical assumptions and state of research<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

This article discusses the educational needs of pupils with migration experience, in terms of their language development, considering both the language of the host country and the parents' native language. The introductory character of the considerations is based on a critical analysis of selected literature on the subject. The analysis of theoretical assumptions and empirical research on the needs and support for the language development of early school-age pupils reveals different needs of children depending on the type of their migration experience. In addition to specific educational needs, general needs essential for academic success are also emphasized, regardless of the migration type. The conclusion underlines the importance of individualizing the educational process to support the linguistic development of children with migration experience.

**Keywords:** children with migration experience, early childhood education, educational needs, language development, multilingualism

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzieci z doświadczeniem migracji, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, potrzeby edukacyjne, rozwój językowy, wielojęzyczność

### **Introduction**

In Polish schools, pupils with migration experience constitute a growing and internally quite diverse group whose needs vary and require different types of measures at different

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stages of education. However, despite the differences, common to all groups of migrant children are the educational needs (especially in terms of language development) that are the subject of this study. Irrespective of whether a child comes to school from a family of labour migrants, refugees, or re-emigrants, he or she needs a command of the language of the country of destination, in the reality of a Polish school – the Polish language – in order to successfully adapt at school and achieve results linked to his or her capabilities. It is the language that is the key, not only to school adaptation, but also to integration into the class and school community and, more broadly, to finding a way in Polish culture and society.

Early childhood education as a stage of education is a time of introducing the child to regular learning, with the first extremely important element being school adaptation, which involves learning about the culture of the school, ways of learning, and establishing peer relationships. At the level of early childhood teaching, the idea of individualisation is the basis. The language of instruction is not yet very advanced, and the range of knowledge is only the minimum necessary for further learning. The cross-curricular integration and illustrative nature of the methods facilitate comprehension of the content taught while graphically attractive teaching materials and a playful form of learning encourage the child to engage in the learning process (cf., e.g., Murawska 2014; Kotarba 2016). It may be argued that this brief characterisation of early childhood education already shows that – more than other stages of education – it can be a space for meeting the needs of pupils with migration experience.

This article, which is of **a general and introductory character**, is theoretical in nature. It is based on a **critical analysis of selected literature on the subject**. Its **purpose** is to describe the educational needs of a child with migration experience<sup>2</sup> in terms of language development, both in the area of the language of the family's destination country and the language of the parents' origin. The needs presented will be addressed as a challenge to the Polish education system. The basis for considerations included here is an analysis of theoretical assumptions as well as the state of research on the needs and support for the language development and education of children with migration experience in their early childhood<sup>3</sup>.

First, the characteristics of a child with migration experience learning in a Polish school, the applicable legal framework, and the functioning solutions and models of education will be discussed. The different types of pupils' needs, among which are educational needs, will also be identified. Then, based on an analysis of the available empirical research (i.e., case studies), the linguistic development of a child with this type of experience will be briefly presented, with a particular focus on early childhood. An important part of the article will be the presentation of educational needs shared by all children with migration

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this text, educational needs are understood as the "state of lack", the difference between the current level of knowledge and skills of a pupil with migration experience and the desired level that will allow him or her to adapt to the new school and to achieve his or her goals in the course of education (cf., Jundziłł 2000: 9–12; Pamuła-Behrens, Szymańska 2017: 20–21).

<sup>3</sup> By using this term, we refer to the age of the pupil at the early childhood education stage.

experience and specific to particular groups, distinguished on the basis of the character of their migration experience.

### Children with migration experience in Polish schools

The diversity of pupils with migration experience has different sources. The educational situation of children from this group depends, among other things, on such factors as the reason for the family's stay in the country, the attitude towards settling in Poland, the mother tongue, the parents' education, or the legal and economic situation of the whole family (cf., Błeszyńska 2010: 28).

The **group of pupils with migration experience**, taking into account the different types of this migration, can include, among others, children from the following types of families:

- **labour migrants** moving – temporarily or permanently – to another country in search of better living and working conditions (economic migration);
- **forced migrants** – refugees, asylum seekers (forced migration);
- **“return” migrants** – Poles returning to the country after a period of migration (re-migration) (cf., Błeszyńska 2010: 10–13; Chrzanowska, Jachimczak 2018: 88).

Moving to another country and changing schools are major challenges for children. This is particularly difficult when the child is at the stage of **school adaptation**. Entering the education system itself involves much stress for the child. This seems all the more difficult when the school is located in another country and operates according to rules specific to a culture that is foreign to the child. Even if the child has already received education abroad, he or she has to get acquainted with the often different educational system, catch up on curriculum differences, and usually master the language of the country of settlement (cf., Markowska-Manista 2016).

In the light of the current **legislation**, children with migration experience have the obligation and – at the same time – the right to gratuitous education in the Polish educational system (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2024 r. poz. 750 ze zm. [consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 750 with amendments]). The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 23 August 2017 (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2023 r., poz. 2301 [consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2023, item 2301]) – on the education of persons who are not Polish citizens and persons who are Polish citizens and who have received education in schools operating in the educational systems of other countries – stipulates, among other requirements, the conditions and procedure for the admission of this group of pupils, the manner of organizing additional learning of the Polish language and additional remedial classes in the subjects taught, and the learning of the language and culture of the country of origin. Under the Ukraine Citizens Assistance Act (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2024 r. poz. 167 ze zm. [consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 167 with amendments]) in force in Poland since March 2022, additional regulations on Polish language learning and educational support have been introduced for

Ukrainian pupils who have come to Poland owing to the armed conflict in the territory of their country.

What results from these regulations is the fact that there are two models of education functioning in Poland – **the model of education for foreign pupils and the model of education for remigrant pupils** (Miodunka et al. 2018: 110). The former is inclusive as it entails including pupils in education with Polish-speaking children regardless of their level of command of Polish. Children can attend additional Polish language lessons and remedial classes. The latter model, the so-called “separation model”, allows an intensive study of the language of the country of settlement in preparatory classes and the implementation of compulsory education (cf., tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2023r., poz. 2301, § 16 [consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2023, item 2301, § 16]).

Each of these models has both advantages and disadvantages. The former provides an opportunity for total immersion in the Polish language and culture and daily contact with Polish peers. However, owing to insufficient language skills, communication and educational barriers emerge in pupils with migration experience (which result in, among other things, establishing no relations with Polish peers and having decreased motivation to learn) and, consequently, emotional and social problems (cf., Stankiewicz, Żurek 2022). In the case of **preparatory classes**, it is much easier to adapt teaching methods and techniques owing to the greater homogeneity of the group. Likewise, it is easier to adapt the teaching content to relevant pupils’ language proficiency levels. The increased number of hours of learning Polish as a foreign language gives them the opportunity to gradually acquire a specialized language in various school subjects. However, owing to their separating nature, preparatory forms are not conducive to integrating pupils with migration experience into the Polish-speaking school environment and may foster discriminating against pupils with migration experience by pupils of Polish origin (Dąbrowa 2024: 241–242).

It is worth adding that children with migration experience have the right to learn the language and culture of their country of origin on the school premises; the school should make it possible for the relevant diplomatic, consular post, or non-governmental organization operating in the territory of Poland representing the nationality concerned (cf. tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2023r., poz. 2301, § 20 [consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2023, item 2301, § 20]).

### **Linguistic development of a child with migration experience in the light of empirical research**

Various approaches can be distinguished in the study of children with migration experience, including pedagogical, sociological, linguistic, speech therapy, and glotto-didactic perspectives (Żurek 2023: 41). They focus mainly on educational difficulties, the course of the adaptation and/or readaptation process in the new environment, the development of competence in Polish as a foreign language and the language(s) of the parents, upbringing in

multilingualism, and the cognitive and emotional-social development of the child. A popular research method is the case study.

**The case studies** presented here concern children between the ages of 6 and 9 who have ended up in the Polish education system as a result of the decision of the whole family to migrate. Diagnosing different types of difficulties at the early education stage will help to formulate a list of needs specific to pupils with migration experience and to develop recommendations to meet these needs.

Through several case studies, Klaudia Bączyk-Lesiuk analyses **education for bilingualism in the Polish-Ukrainian environment**. One of them is devoted to a boy of Ukrainian origin who started attending a Polish school at the age of seven. This was his first contact with the school environment and the Polish language. As the researcher points out, he went through three phases of adaptation to the new situation, i.e., the phase of uncertainty, the phase of reassurance, and the phase of satisfaction (Bączyk-Lesiuk 2016: 14). As time went on, he began to pay more and more attention to education in Polish, thus neglecting the cultivation of his language and culture. He used the Polish version of his name. When in the company of his classmates, he communicated with his parents in Polish. His mother ceased to be a linguistic authority for him due to her weaker command of Polish. Another case study pertains to a boy who entered a Polish school at the age of nine. Contact with his parents was limited (owing to their poor knowledge of Polish) and, despite two additional Polish lessons, the pupil felt alienated, did not socialise with his peers, and began to display aggressive behaviour. According to Bączyk-Lesiuk (2016: 17), the main source of failure was the lack of school support, which – in turn – contributed to the pupil's problems on the educational, psychological, and social levels.

Barbara Kyrc (2016) assessed the **development of phonological competence** (enabling future learning of reading and writing) using a case study of two **boys aged six and seven** from labour migrant families of **Ukrainian and Russian-Georgian origin**. Both families planned to stay permanently in Poland and their children started their education in a Polish school. They were diagnosed with various difficulties determined by their individual cognitive, emotional, and language development. One of the children showed fairly harmonious Polish and Ukrainian language development. Another one, although he did not have the expected school maturity, started first grade at the age of six (owing to organisational reasons and parental decisions) and, owing to cognitive deficits, delayed development of linguistic competence in Polish, and emotional-social difficulties, and suffered numerous school failures, which – in turn – were manifested in the boy's reluctance to go to school and his being sent as a problematic pupil to the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre (Kyrc 2016: 142). On top of this, his native languages (i.e., Russian and Georgian), acquired in the first place, began to undergo receding (the so-called attrition; cf., Laskowski 2009). The example of these two cases shows the differentiated development of the Polish language in a situation of bilingualism or trilingualism.

Another case study involved a **bilingual child treated as a pupil with special educational needs**. A six-year-old boy of Ukrainian origin was diagnosed for school maturity

by a psychologist and speech therapist (Kyrč 2018). The diagnosis showed a high level of cognitive development in the boy and good general knowledge. In addition, low graphomotor skills, difficulties in spatial orientation and visuospatial coordination, as well as a limited lexical resource were observed. The child was also found to exhibit linguistic behaviours typical of bilingual development, including code-mixing or interference at the lexical and phonetic levels (Kyrč 2018: 61–62). Owing to the identified deficits in areas relevant to school maturity, what was suggested to the parents was to leave the child in the pre-school unit for another year in order to equalise his educational opportunities.

To date, there has been little empirical work describing children with early childhood migration experiences who find themselves – as a result of moving – in the Polish education system. These are mainly single case studies of a qualitative research nature, focusing on the description of children's language deficits and emotional and social difficulties associated with going to a Polish school. They indirectly describe the child's educational needs, drawing attention to deficiencies in the development of the Polish language and the language of the country of origin.

### Types of migration experience and children's educational needs

As the presented overview of the state of research shows, a child with migration experience has diverse and complex educational needs, the satisfaction of which can ensure his or her effective participation in the educational process. The starting point for creating a list of these educational needs in terms of language development will be **the glotto-pedagogical model of teaching Polish as a second language developed by Przemysław Gębał** (2018), which combines the concepts of teaching Polish as a foreign and second language and the ideas of intercultural pedagogy. In it, the author points out that learning both the Polish language and Polish culture becomes a means to integrate and include pupils with migration experience into the Polish educational system and life in Poland. Language and cultural learning should be accompanied by the development of linguistic awareness (through actions supporting the promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism) and the shaping of pupils' intercultural competences. Such an approach places **the satisfaction of the child's social and emotional needs** related to functioning in a new place in a culturally diverse situation as well as in the context of the so-called **child's well-being**, often cited in more recent pedagogical, psychological, and glotto-didactic literature, at the core of the child's language development (cf., Cerna 2019). These aspects seem particularly relevant in the context of the increasing multiculturalism of Polish schooling and the high proportion of children with refugee experience (cf., e.g., Pyżalski et al. 2022). In what follows, the educational needs of pupils with migration experience in terms of language development will be discussed more fully.

To a large extent, the type of these needs depends on the type of experience we deal with. With reference to the three categories mentioned earlier, it is possible to distinguish

**the general and migration-specific educational needs of pupils in terms of language development.** The former ones are common to all pupils with migration experience and will be discussed below, while the latter are treated as specific to the selected groups and are influenced by the family's migration situation, the family's reasons for coming to Poland and further plans, the resulting motivation of the child to study, and the child's initial level of Polish language proficiency (Rafał-Luniewska 2022). It is worth noting that a great deal of variation can also be seen within specific groups. However, some generalisations have been proposed for the purpose of this article.

The needs of **pupils from return migrant families** generally do not concern the Polish language for everyday communication as they take this spoken variety of Polish from home. However, difficulties may arise in writing, especially in calligraphy, correct spelling, and when producing longer written statements. For them, Polish is an inherited language, learnt in the home environment and possibly through Polish education (Lipińska, Seretny 2016; Żurek 2018). Children of return migrants are usually bilingual and, therefore, we can also talk about the need to develop bilingualism by supporting language development within the language of the country from which they came to Poland (Lipińska, Seretny 2019).

In the case of **children of labour migrants**, the needs for communicative language skills are definitely greater even when they start learning Polish while still in their country of origin as part of the family's preparations for migration. In a Polish school, they undertake regular reading and writing lessons. Thanks to the family's plans to stay in Poland for a longer period, children are better motivated to learn a new language, seeing their immediate future in Poland. Here, too, there is a need to work on the development of the child's bilingualism, which is compounded by the context of forming a cultural identity (accompanying language acquisition) specific to the country of origin (cf., e.g., Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, Szostak-Król 2019).

Regarding the dimension of linguistic and identity development, in the case of **children with refugee experience**, the educational needs are similar, but the conditions are different. While labour migrants chose their country of migration and decided to come, preparing for it accordingly, refugees found themselves in Poland without any prior planning to leave their own country. Migrants who come to Poland in search of work have the opportunity to return to their home country. Refugee families, conversely, face forced migration – they often do not choose the direction of migration; their departure is sudden and unplanned and their stay in Poland is associated with a sense of temporariness, with no possibility of returning to their homeland in the near future. With regard to the child's linguistic development and education, this involves a frequent lack of motivation to learn Polish and reluctance to attend a Polish school. The need to develop this motivation seems to distinguish this group of children with migration experience. The educational process itself should be based on the satisfaction of a sense of security as one of the basic needs, leaving educational needs in the background (Cerna 2019).

**General needs that apply to all pupils with migration experience** at the early childhood stage can be broadly divided into two groups. These are the need for learning Polish



as a foreign/second language and the need for developing the child's bilingualism (multilingualism). A child entering a new classroom and school community wants to communicate effectively with his or her peers and teachers. As already mentioned, children from return migrant families have little difficulty with this owing to their developed **ability to speak** about everyday matters in Polish (Lipińska, Seretny 2016: 55). The acquisition of competence in everyday communication also proceeds rapidly for speakers of other Slavic languages, including Ukrainian children who constitute a large group in Polish schools (Jędryka 2022a). At the first stage of learning Polish as a foreign language, emphasis is placed on developing receptive skills (i.e., listening comprehension and reading with understanding), followed by productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). In both cases, it is crucial to shape the phonological-phonetic system responsible for, among other things, the recognition of the sounds of new speech, and correct, foreign accent-free, pronunciation in Polish (Błasiak-Tytuła 2019).

It is also quite a challenge to **master the language of schooling** (Jędryka 2014, 2022a; Pamuła-Behrens 2018; Seretny 2024). Its familiarity allows active participation in classroom activities. At the early childhood stage, the language is not yet extensive, especially with regard to instructions, task descriptions, and selected subject terms, which are also often unfamiliar to Polish-speaking pupils. The earlier that children with migration experience are integrated into the Polish educational system, the easier it is to respond to these needs. In addition, intensive language training and total immersion in Polish can give them a good start in school (Jędryka 2022a: 35–39).

The situation is similar for the development of **literacy** in pupils with migration experience, including the basics of **orthography**. In the case of early childhood, there is **primary alphabetisation** in a language that is not their first (native) language. As Beata Jędryka notes, “On the surface, such a glotto-didactic situation may seem easier, but it requires the instructor to combine glotto-didactic, speech therapy, and pedagogical competences appropriate for working with a pupil who will soon become bilingual” (2022a: 36). Significantly, **reading skills** at the early childhood education stage are regarded as fundamental for the further educational pathway. Their mastery enables effective learning in the classroom and during independent learning (Balgoma 2024). It is related to the need to have access to attractive literature at an age-appropriate level and adapted to their language skills, which is seen as important by children with migration experience.

Preparation in **fine motor skills** is essential even before the first attempts at writing are made. **Calligraphy**, which is developed to a different extent in the different education systems (also in the course of pre-school education) from which migrant pupils come to Poland, is an important part of early childhood education and a particular challenge for children with migration experience, including children from return migrant families. The latter group, giving the impression of native speakers, are very often unfamiliar with spelling rules, and the written variety of Polish and the composition and production of written texts reflect the spoken version of Polish (Lipińska, Seretny 2019: 290–291).



The early years and migrant experience of the learner mean that learning Polish as a foreign and second language requires the consideration of specific challenges at the level of didactics and subject methodology. The child needs an individualised approach in the spirit of **the CLIL approach to content- and language-integrated learning**, combining learning of subject content and learning Polish as a foreign language (Jędryka 2022b). The language of the child's country of origin/migration, together with the child's previous experiences, including those of an educational nature and related to the home environment, determine the child's Polish language learning needs. The educational process, the methods and techniques used, and the teaching materials should be adapted, not only to the age of the learner, but also to his or her skills, cognitive abilities, and knowledge of other languages. A child at this stage has a particular approach to language learning, which works best if it is treated as fun and adventure, with a move towards practice and the use of language in specific situations (Wieszczczyńska 2009: 49). It is essential to use activating methods, movement, and ludic forms (Siek-Piskozub 2009: 10).

Early childhood bilingualism researchers point out the need for the harmonious development of both language systems in order to achieve school maturity, which consists of readiness to take on the tasks and responsibilities that school places on the child (e.g., Kyrč 2016: 138). A child of Polish origin, a child from a family of return migrants, and a foreign child undoubtedly need **support in preserving the language of the country they have lived in so far** and developing competence in the area of **bilingualism**. It is about striving for full mastery of different language systems, going beyond the knowledge of the language of everyday communication in the case of the language of the parents' country of origin/previous family residence. It is therefore important to progressively develop reading and writing competences and to expand the lexical stock in the second language, which is developed outside the school environment (Kyrč 2018).

A child with migration experience, arriving from an English-speaking country, has the opportunity to use English from the early childhood stage onwards, but his or her competence to do so will go well beyond that of other pupils, which may pose some challenges from the perspective of subject didactics (cf., Stankiewicz 2019). There is then the need for the teacher to show appreciation of the pupil's language potential so that he or she wants to develop it outside school as well. In the case of other languages not introduced at the stage of early childhood education in the Polish system, it is important to build the child's linguistic awareness and positive attitude towards multilingualism, valuing his or her language of origin/language of the country from which he or she has come, and the language competences already acquired (in the case of re-emigrant pupils), which will support the building of the child's well-being as well as his or her linguistic development already outside school (Stankiewicz 2019; cf., Cerna 2019).

## Conclusions

On the basis of the above critical review of the literature on the subject, taking into account the results of empirical research, the paper has discussed the **needs of a child with migration experience in terms of his or her language development with a particular focus on the early school stage**. It is worth remembering that, when talking about the development of a child being integrated into the Polish educational system, we should have in mind not only the Polish language, which – in this case – is treated as a foreign or second language at the very beginning, but also the language of the country from which the child has come to Poland. What is, therefore, a highly vital need is to promote bilingualism towards its balanced form, allowing the child to function in both language systems, and beyond their spoken varieties and everyday communication.

The educational needs of the child have been discussed against the background of theoretical and empirical assumptions, taking into account the needs specific to the type of migration experience and common to all pupils with this experience. Among the needs of a general nature, the mastery of Polish as a foreign/second language, including literacy and the language of schooling, has been highlighted as crucial.

According to the core curriculum for early childhood education, one of its most important assumptions is the training of Polish language skills, taking care to enrich pupils' vocabulary, among other things, in terms of subject terminology – the language of schooling, which seems particularly important in the case of children with migration experience. At this stage, the pace of teaching is much slower than in the further grades, and integrated teaching proves to be more beneficial for children with migration experience because of the development of their basic skills such as everyday communication, reading, and writing.

Addressing diverse learning needs undoubtedly requires taking an individual approach to each child with migration experience, adapting teaching methods and techniques to his or her abilities, and supporting his or her development also outside school. This involves, among other things, adapting the core curriculum for early childhood education and the curricula for teaching Polish as a foreign and second language to the capabilities of this group of pupils, using varied age- and linguistically- appropriate teaching materials and employing the activating methods that engage them cognitively and emotionally. Individualisation of the learning process aimed at the pupils' needs could be beneficial and desirable. It seems that it is the key to adapting the learning process to the needs of the child with migration experience.

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### Legal acts

- Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 23 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie kształcenia osób niebędących obywatelami polskimi oraz osób będących obywatelami polskimi, które pobierały naukę w szkołach funkcjonujących w systemach oświaty innych państw (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2023 r., poz. 2301) [Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 23 August 2017 on the education of persons who are not Polish citizens and persons who are Polish citizens and who have received education in schools operating in the educational systems of other countries (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2023, item 2301)].
- Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2024 r. poz. 167 ze zm.) [Act of 12 March 2022 on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of the country (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 167 with amendments)].
- Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. – Prawo oświatowe (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2024 r. poz. 737) [Education Law Act of 14 December 2016 (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 737)].
- Ustawa z dnia 7 września 1991 r. o systemie oświaty (tekst jedn.: Dz. U. z 2024 r. poz. 750 ze zm.) [Educational System Act of 7 September 1991 (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2024, item 750 with amendments)].