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Between the need for survival and entanglement in the system. The needs of Ukrainian students as perceived by Polish teachers

Summary

This article presents an analysis of Polish early education teachers' perceptions of the needs of Ukrainian students. The analysis is based on research conducted in the Tricity region immediately after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. The analysis focuses on the broader context of school education, including the significance of needs related to exploration, independence, and development, as discussed in the framework of the functioning of the school system.

Keywords: children's needs, refugee students, school, war in Ukraine

Słowa kluczowe: potrzeby dziecka, uczniowie uchodźcy, szkoła, wojna w Ukrainie

The needs of the child are one of the key issues in pedagogy. In the literature, we can find a variety of references and meanings given to needs (e.g. Dewey 1972; Montessori 2004), as well as research and reflections on possibilities and ways to respond to them (e.g. Kosiorek 2010; Nitecka-Walerych 2019). The needs of the child in the context of education are a complex issue that requires consideration of both psycho-physical and environmental aspects, as well as issues of the child's subjectivity (Bałachowicz 2014; Miś, Ornacka 2015) and rights (Runswick-Cole, Hodge 2009). Hattie (2009) has shown that a teacher's ability to respond to student needs, the ability to build relationships with students and the way in which knowledge is communicated make a difference to educational outcomes. Attention is also drawn to critical approaches to the concept of special educational needs (Benjamin 2005; Warnock, Norwich 2010; Hornby 2011). Freeman and Toope (1996), point to the dominance of the discourse of children's needs over discussions of their rights. Meanwhile, children's rights should be absolute and independent of the fulfilment of specific needs, as should their subjectivity and perception as active participants in society (Miś, Ornacka 2015). Parents' and teachers' understanding of the child's needs is crucial for the child's adaptation to the school environment and overall development (Rokicka 2008), as well as for creating an environment that fosters learning and knowledge construction.

The aim of this article is to examine Polish teachers' perceptions of the needs of Ukrainian children as perceived immediately after the outbreak of the war. It is based on a survey carried out in March–June 2022 in collaboration with Dr Magdalena Muszel.

I deliberately refer to a study from more than two years ago, as these events revealed both the mobilization potential and the deficits of the Polish education system. In this respect, this critical experience of the Polish school (Popow 2023) is a significant, and unique in its own way, research situation. Considering the multi-faceted development of the child, I will look at Polish teachers' perceptions of the needs of Ukrainian children in relation to both basic needs and needs related to development, learning, and the construction of knowledge.

The functioning at school of a child with a migration experience poses many challenges arising from the need to adapt to a new educational and peer environment, as well as to culture, standards, and values. This process can be particularly difficult because of the language barrier, which can make communication difficult in a new school. Children have to find their place in new peer groups, which often involves dealing with social exclusion and stereotypes (Tędziągolska et al. 2022). Changing the educational environment involves not only learning in a new language, but also adapting to different teaching methods and different expectations of teachers and of the school system. Research shows that migrant children often experience feelings of alienation and stress, which can negatively affect their educational performance and self-esteem (Rabczuk 2013; Markowska-Manista 2016). Migrant children enter a new school already with specific learning experiences, with knowledge of a different school culture or parenting styles, which significantly affect learning processes (Pavlenko 2005; Norton 2014). The dynamics of learning processes in the school classroom will also change. Children's needs in this context will be shaped both specifically in relation to their situation and developmentally in general, and will be driven by the child's age. The reasons and circumstances of migration and refugeeism, as well as the socio-political situation in the student's country of origin, are also relevant. Also relevant is their cultural baggage, which was shaped within a particular cultural script, the importance of post-migration socio-economic status, family structure and type of linguistic socialization (Rabczuk 2013: 47), as well as previous educational experiences, the cultural framework of social behaviour in which he or she grew up, habits, traditions, and the degree of openness to intercultural communication, integration, and collaboration in the Polish school (Markowska-Manista 2016: 130–131). Norton (2014; 2019) shows that for people with migration experience, a variety of socio-cultural factors plays a role in knowledge construction processes, such as, for example, knowledge gained in the country of origin, cultural differences, and social beliefs about the new social role – the migrant. In the case of children, owing to their lesser life experience, these factors will be less complex, but they will not be insignificant. Importantly, however, the experience of migration does not bring to a halt the child's other needs related to his or her development as an individual. The child develops all the time, so the school should respond to the child's diverse needs, not just those related to the migration experience.

The challenges listed above are compounded when arrival in a new country is forced by a life-threatening situation, as was the case in the period following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. Children who found themselves in Poland experienced strongly stressful situations related to escape, the chaos of war, the uncertainty of tomorrow, and

the loss of their loved ones. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the stress and trauma required the creation of conditions that would enable them to regain a sense of security and stability. Integration in the new educational context in Poland turned out to be a multidimensional process that required understanding and adequate support from the educational and social system, which proved to be unprepared in many aspects: legal, psychological support, social assistance, but also ignorance of the basics of intercultural psychology and intercultural knowledge-building processes (Grzybowski 2023; Popow 2023). Attempts to adapt the existing model of teachers' work to the new reality have begun. Current research into their situation in Poland indicates that these experiences continue to have a profound impact on children and their ability to adapt in a new environment (Markowska-Manista, Owczarenko 2024). This means that children with war refugee experience are a special group of students, currently stratified into those who have already been in the Polish system for two years, and those who are yet to enter it with the introduction of compulsory schooling for all Ukrainian children residing in Poland in the 2024/2025 school year. Therefore, the question of how these children, with their diverse needs, function in the Polish educational system, and how their needs are perceived by teachers, becomes crucial. It is significant that the exact number of Ukrainian children who should go to school in Poland is unknown, which shows our limited knowledge of them.

The article consists of four parts. After an introduction, I will present in it, in turn, the completed survey on the basis of which the analysis of teachers' perceptions of the needs of Ukrainian children is conducted, the analysis itself, and conclusions.

About the study

This article is based on a survey carried out among public and non-public school teachers at primary and secondary level in the period March–June 2022. We conducted 12 in-depth individual interviews that focused on the reconstruction of teachers' experiences, taking into account everyday school life and contacts with Polish and Ukrainian students and their parents. For the purpose of this article, I selected eight interviews conducted among early childhood education teachers. All respondents were women 30–56 years old, university graduates of various profiles with pedagogical specializations. The respondents teach in public schools and one sole private primary school with a foreign language profile.

The small number of interviews was a limitation of the study, owing to the difficulties we encountered during implementation, mainly related to the difficulty of obtaining respondents. Initially, these were to be heads of public facilities. Unfortunately, many people refused to participate in the survey, often without giving a reason. Therefore, we decided to change the target group and the research tool, focusing on teachers. In view of the difficulties in constructing the sample, we also decided to conduct the survey on a smaller group, but in a more in-depth form. The interviews were partly free-form in nature, and dealt with complex issues such as teachers' subjective perceptions of school reality and of the integration

process, of their role, and of the changes they experienced in their work after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The interviews were coded in accordance with predetermined codes in the qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti v.9). For the purpose of this article, threads related to elements of learning, integration, crisis, knowledge, and also related to the analytical category 'learner needs' were used. Codes are used in the citations to indicate the order in which the interview was conducted and the type of school.

In what follows, I will present an analysis of the categories of needs of Ukrainian students. In order to describe them clearly, I will use the categories of a set of children's needs created by Ciechomska and Ciechomski (2016), on which the systematization of isolated needs and their description is based.

The needs of war refugee children in teachers' narratives

The experience of war just across the border leads to a suspension of the ordinary in favour of a state of emergency in which priorities and needs change dramatically. In such a situation, schools and teachers face new and unfamiliar challenges, forcing rapid mobilization and adaptation. In describing that period, Polish teachers pointed to the need to act quickly and the uncertainty of how to educate refugee children and how to deal with their difficult experiences. Providing them with a safe environment and meeting their **biological needs**, which were most frequently mentioned by teachers, became a priority. Knowledge of these was mainly obtained by the teachers from the mothers during the initial interview at the admission of the children to the school. Owing to the language barrier, this information was incomplete, but most often mothers indicated a lack of basic supplies and school aids. Collections were organized in many schools to raise food, clothing and furniture for families. The teachers interviewed talk about meeting children's biological needs in moral terms – helping is a measure of humanity here:

Well how could we not help, after all, they are people, they have nothing here. I do this profession because I have this sensitivity in me, I am not indifferent to the fate of children, I think we have a certain moral obligation (K_8_public).

For teachers, supporting children was integral to their role as caregivers and educators, and a reflection of the values of their profession. One can see here a reference to the ethos of the teacher's role as a commitment to certain values that distinguish this professional group from others (Szawiel 1982)

In the area of psychological needs, the most frequently mentioned need was the **need for security**. Respondents were aware that children who had come from war zones needed to feel safe because they had experienced severe stress. However, the lack of knowledge of Ukrainian or Russian meant that understanding of the children's needs

was constructed through improvised communication and general knowledge. Today, these insights are confirmed by research (Markowska-Manista, Owczarenko 2024). Although the need was clearly defined at the outset, it seemed to be impossible for some respondents to meet it. They did not feel prepared to help traumatized children and, on top of that, children who did not speak Polish. The language barrier was presented as insurmountable. In one interview, there is a story of a school psychologist who had a block against communicating in a foreign language. She refused to cooperate, which the teacher interviewed accepted with understanding, but emphasized that she and her colleagues were left alone with the problems (K_1_public). The teachers surveyed repeatedly admitted that they were unable to cope with the scale of problems that arose. It should be added that children who had needs in the area of specialized support, regardless of their experience of war, were also placed in schools. Most often, in the case of my study, these involved autism spectrum disorder, not previously diagnosed in Ukraine. The sense of lack of specialist knowledge, the lack of opportunities to communicate, and the lack of specialized support in Ukrainian, led educators at the time to recount a sense of failure and loneliness. The lack of communication with the children during their first period was also influenced by the teachers' fear of what they could potentially learn, as illustrated by the following quote:

- There are three girls with us from the east of Ukraine, we don't know exactly where from or what happened there, they don't talk about it.
- Don't you ask? Don't you know what city they come from?
- We don't want to, these children may have been traumatized, we don't even know how to ask. It's the east of Ukraine, anything could have happened there.
- What about the parents? Do you have any contact with them?
- We would like to encourage these mothers somehow, but maybe this contact with the school is different in their case (K_7_private school).

In the interviews analysed, the Ukrainian child becomes the Other who cannot be recognized. In the statements analysed, it is possible to reconstruct the figure of the child as a recipient of help from outside the Polish cultural circle, with whom communication is difficult. The teachers surveyed admitted on more than one occasion that they had guessed what the new children in the class may have needed. Several times in the interviews we can find stories about silent children who stay in the classroom without being able to communicate fully. Their needs, but also their knowledge, previous experiences, or abilities, remained unrecognised. The communication impasse was only broken when the children began to speak Polish. A clear line was symbolically drawn between being a refugee in school and becoming a student, as research on migrant language learning processes confirms (Pavlenko 2005; Norton 2014). Gao et al. (2022) go as far as writing about the invisible wall that separates the migrant from the rest of society.

All respondents emphasized that they were not linguistically prepared to receive children from Ukraine. The teachers themselves put a lot of emphasis on their own need to communicate with Ukrainian children, but also on the feeling of helplessness in the absence of a common language:

These children are polite, they sit still, they don't say anything. We have a boy from Belarus and he talks to them and communicates to us what they need. Somehow we have to manage, thank God we have this X who helps us (K_2_state school).

The above quote illustrates the mechanism we find in most of the interviews analysed. Information about the children was constructed on the basis of observation of their behaviour. Withdrawn children who spoke a different language were judged by being polite, while their needs were communicated through another child from the same cultural background. Involving other Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking children who knew Polish as interpreters was cited as an example of skilful handling of the situation. The activity was also judged to be educationally positive, as the children helped their classmates. What was not taken into account, however, was that this cast children in the roles of adult caregivers, a type of parentification of migrant children (Titzmann 2012; Masiran et al. 2023).

The need for contact and attention among children does not appear as a separate category in the teachers' narratives, but references to it can be found in the stories of children who, after getting used to their new school and gaining confidence, behaved in a way similar to their Polish peers. This is evidenced by statements from teachers such as: "a child is a child" or "these children behave in the same way". The need for attention among migrant children could also be perceived as excessive:

These children also need attention from us, every child does. We don't know much about them, we still don't know what they need specifically, but our attention, contact, being together with the mistress at school are normal needs, all children have them. The only problem is that they need more, they cling to us. We have a girl like that, she can't get unstuck from the teacher, and we have a dozen other children and each one needs attention. Then there are the parents. We can't just deal with this girl. People have limited resources (K_4_public).

The perceived overload of the girl's need for attention in the interview translates into a sense of being overwhelmed by the expectations of students and parents, which is described in the literature as one of the causes of teacher burnout (Kocór 2019). This problem particularly affected the surveyed teachers at the time of the war crisis. Fatigue, burnout, and uncertainty about how to cope with perceived social demands resounded in the interviews. Teachers articulated the conflict between society's expectations of treating each student individually and responding to their needs and their own mental and physical condition. Here, the needs of Ukrainian students became an additional overload factor, especially as teachers also felt morally obliged to respond to them.

The child's need for acceptance was clearly articulated in the teachers' narratives. One gets the impression that teachers were sensitive to this issue, hence their activities aimed at integrating Ukrainian children with Polish students through festivals, days of Polish and Ukrainian culture, or cooking national dishes together. Teachers expressed their conviction that when the Polish and Ukrainian communities get to know each other better, it will be easier for them to function in one school and Ukrainian children will not be exposed to aggression and exclusion from their Polish peers. However, it is worth noting that integration was to be achieved primarily through presenting national cultures, although the school also provided other forms of activity, such as trips, games, and entertainment. However, the national factor was of particular importance. The teachers' narratives show a division into Polish students, who also included students who had previously come to Poland, and Ukrainian students. It was organized in accordance with the category of language used by the students. The need for acceptance was to be satisfied through mutual knowledge of traditionally understood culture and the basics of language, which was implemented in the form of games and puns. In a similar way, attempts were made to satisfy the need for a child's **meaningful life**, understood here not as stimulating the child's reflectiveness (Ciechomska, Ciechomski 2016), but as the goal of education. Immediately after the arrival of war refugee students, teachers spoke about the need to build attitudes of respect and understanding between Poles and Ukrainians despite their difficult history. The creating of space for cultivating national identity and the opportunity to present Polish and Ukrainian culture was an important aspect of building the meaning of lives. This was aimed, on the one hand, at integrating students, as discussed in the need for acceptance, but on the other hand, it was intended to enable students from Ukraine to be themselves:

We are constantly organizing meetings, gatherings, Polish and Ukrainian cuisine days, we look at traditional costumes so that these children can feel familiar in something, maybe experts, so that they can talk about their culture (K_4_public).

The national matrix, through which an attempt was made to satisfy the need for acceptance and meaning in life, but also for exploration, independence, and development, made it possible for children, to refer to the already familiar cultural circle on the one hand, and on the other hand, it gave special importance to the issue of national culture, which became the essence of identity and distinction. The needs of Ukrainian children related to their development as individuals were therefore perceived as possible to be met only in national categories, through a specific catalogue of characteristics and knowledge belonging to the nation in the cultural sense.

This is also evident in the way teachers perceived **the need for exploration and independence and development** of students from Ukraine. Exploring and learning are some of the most important activities for children, which is also emphasized by the surveyed teachers. These needs are particularly important in the context of learning and building knowledge about the world. As Bruner (2006: 87) writes, the child perceives itself as a cognizing

subject and as a learner. The child therefore, actively builds knowledge about the world, also relating it to his/her own experiences, so coming to Poland did not cancel this sphere of the children's development. In the case of children from Ukraine, the surveyed teachers did not see any significant differences – young children are similarly curious about the world and are eager to learn new forms of expression, which was described by an art teacher who talked about a lesson during which children made collages for the first time (K_7_private school). Typically, these needs were revealed in the child's active exploration of the world, checking, touching, and asking questions, which teachers were not always able to answer, but they emphasized that they tried to understand together. However, school learning in a foreign language is characterized by less freedom, which the surveyed teachers were also aware of. They pointed out that children experienced by war show less interest in the reality surrounding them, which is additionally strengthened by the language barrier and the inability to relate new knowledge to a familiar context. This had a significant impact on learning in the traditional school sense, causing children not to learn as quickly as others and to be unable to remember information. Students were most often motivated to acquire knowledge by the possibility of referring to national knowledge from their country of origin:

I look for Ukrainian fairy tales to introduce the cultural context to these children, but this is not always successful because I do not read Cyrillic. However, I always look for something from their culture on the Internet, so that they can also associate it with it (K_1_public).

The repeated use of references to national culture is significant in the context of the perception of the student's identity. The possibility of using one's own culture by analogy to Polish culture in order to acquire the knowledge required in Poland became an effective teaching method in the analysed narratives of teachers. Its goal, however, was neither integration nor emancipation, but was subordinated to the need to acquire the necessary knowledge. In the context of existing research on the learning of children and adults with migration experience (Pavlenko 2005; Norton 2014), as well as the transmission of all functions of school and the processes of building knowledge by students (Zalewska 2000; Klus-Stańska 2012), it can be seen that the purpose of references to national culture is for students to memorize facts required by the core curriculum. The need to master the tools for knowledge transfer to foreigners, and therefore teaching technology, is clearly heard in the interviews. There is a need to learn about games and activities that support children's learning, lesson plans, and methods of teaching children with migration experience. Interestingly, the interviews did not indicate that teachers had similar doubts in relation to migrant students who had arrived at the school earlier. The teacher I asked about this said that previously there had been more time to focus on the migrant child because there had been only one in the class, and sometimes even in the whole school. However, this does not change the perspective in which the child is to acquire the knowledge required by the core curriculum, which is the main goal of his or her stay at school, and all activities supporting him or her in this process are of a supportive or therapeutic nature. Therefore, teachers

focused on creating conditions in which children would acquire the required knowledge, which turned out to be difficult, hence the frequent experience of failure in this area (Popow 2023). The natural needs of exploration and development, which were perceived as obvious, were not prioritised but were subordinated to the goals set by the core curriculum.

Referring to Bałachowicz (2015), it can be stated that the analysed material paints an image of a refugee child as a system of deficiencies outside the Polish national circle. A child who did not speak Polish and did not know the Polish canon of knowledge was supposed to learn the required material by analogy or by heart. The acquisition of Polish knowledge thus raised the refugee student to the level expected at school. Significant in this context is the statement of a teacher who described the difficulties in teaching the concepts that students should learn:

Now in the third grade, there are “The Six Bullerbyn Children”, then in the fourth grade in biology there is the concept of photosynthesis, in Polish there is an epithet and a comparison. It is impossible to explain this to children from Ukraine, they have never had it and do not understand it. I finally tell him: “Sorry, you just have to learn it” (K_3_public).

Because school knowledge is perceived as objective, consistent with the achievements of the relevant academic disciplines and based on “bare facts” (Klus-Stańska 2012: 26), and also required by the system, the teacher focused on finding a way for the student to acquire this knowledge. The success of a teacher’s work is measured by the ability to transmit knowledge, which is tested by final examinations. In the quoted fragment, the source of the teacher’s helplessness is the inability to use transmission methods of knowledge transfer, because the language barrier is also a transmission barrier. It is the student who has to adapt to this transmission process of knowledge in Polish schools, even if it means learning the required knowledge by heart.

In this context, children’s needs resulting from learning about the world, exploring it, but also independence and development in the area of knowledge, are not seen or are even eliminated. The child’s need diagnosed in the analysed interviews is rather to survive in the school system, and this is what the surveyed teachers try to fight for in the name of the child’s good over time. Not once in the analysed material is there a belief that children actively construct their knowledge, nor is there any reference to the need for exploration, independence, and development. They are treated more like naturally occurring processes, separate from the teaching of knowledge in schools. Children’s need for exploration and development has been subordinated to the needs of the system. Learning by heart or making references to the national culture were supposed to be a way to meet its requirements.

Conclusion

A critical analysis of the perception of the needs of children from Ukraine and the conditions for the possibility of meeting them in the context of school education shows that the needs of refugee children were treated primarily in terms of ensuring basic needs. This is completely understandable, but considering that the children entered mainstream schools, we should ask about their needs related to development, independence, and building knowledge. The language barrier indicated by all teachers meant that the focus was on translation and methods of memorizing content, without looking for diverse spaces for children to learn. The focus was on children's use of language rather than on communication itself, which confirms previous research on early childhood education practices (Żytko 2014). Assistance quickly turned into a struggle to function in the Polish system. Teachers tried to make sure that the children understood something, acquired the required knowledge, and were promoted to the next grade. The individual needs of children were subordinated to the conditions of the Polish education system, i.e. subordination to examinations and the belief that the aim of school teaching is to implement the core curriculum. It seems that despite the undoubted empathy and effort put into working with children and families from Ukraine, a pre-reflective attitude to forms of education as cultural forms, a common-sense approach, and a transmission model of teaching prevailed (Klus-Stańska 2012). Not education, but promotion from grade to grade became the goal. The result was that children sat idle, learnt by heart or used translators to meet the requirements of the school system. At the same time, the developmental needs of children are strongly embedded in their national identity, which has its positive side, as it enables them to cultivate their own traditions, but on the other hand it indicates that the acceptable space for refugee children to function at school is the practices arising from their national culture.

In a broader context, one should ask what significance the school message has for children from Ukraine as learning subjects and active members of society, in which they learn at the very first stage that their task is to survive in the system at the cost of subordinating their needs. Regardless of how long they stay in Poland, they have the right to develop their individuality and learn various social roles. A message based on survival and subordination does not reinforce their needs for individual development and building knowledge, nor does it build social capital.

When thinking about the needs and rights of children, it is important to remember both their basic needs necessary for survival, but also their needs related to individual and socio-cultural development. As Hannah Arendt writes: "Man has a tendency, if other life needs are not too pressing, even to (...) – think that is to go beyond the limitations of knowledge and use one's intellectual possibilities, the power of one's mind, for something more than collecting information and making practical use of it" (2006: 192). Regardless of the child's status, and recognizing the real hierarchy of his or her needs, the needs related to active participation in learning about the world are also important. Openness in response to these diverse needs is the quintessence of subjective thinking, not only about needs, but also about education.

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