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From challenges to solutions: "Returning students" from abroad in Polish schools – based on participatory workshop results and expert opinions[1]

Od wyzwań do rozwiązań: „uczniowie powracający" z zagranicy w polskich szkołach – na podstawie wyników warsztatów partycypacyjnych i opinii ekspertów[2]

Abstract

Children returning to Poland with their parents face numerous challenges related to adapting to Polish schools and the education system. The aim of this article is to identify and analyze the challenges associated with "returning" to school in Poland, as well as to suggest solutions that support the adaptation process from the perspective of the school, the family, and cooperation between them. The article is based on the results of empirical research conducted as part of a project funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (UMO-2020/39/D/HS6/00162). The data analyzed come from participatory workshops with teachers and parents, as well as expert interviews. The research findings indicate that the most significant adaptation challenges concern linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological areas. The article also presents recommendations developed during the workshops for supporting students from returning migrant families.

Keywords: return migration, remigration, school adaptation, students with migration experience, educational support, cooperation family and school

Streszczenie

Dzieci powracające wraz z rodzicami do Polski mierzą się z licznymi wyzwaniami związanymi z adaptacją do polskiej szkoły i systemu edukacji. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja oraz analiza wyzwań związanych z „powrotem" do szkoły w Polsce, a także wskazanie rozwiązań wspierających proces adaptacji z perspektywy szkoły, rodziny oraz współpracy między nimi.

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Artykuł opiera się na wynikach badań empirycznych zrealizowanych w ramach projektu finansowanego przez Narodowe Centrum Nauki (UMO-2020/39/D/HS6/00162). Analizowane dane pochodzą z warsztatów partycypacyjnych z udziałem nauczycieli i rodziców oraz wywiadów eksperckich. Wyniki badań wskazują na to, że najważniejsze wyzwania adaptacyjne dotyczą obszarów językowego, kulturowego, społecznego i psychologicznego. W artykule przedstawiono także wypracowane podczas warsztatów rekomendacje dotyczące wsparcia uczniów z rodzin migrantów powrotnych.

Słowa kluczowe: migracje powrotne, reemigracja, adaptacja szkolna, uczniowie z doświadczeniem migracji, wsparcie edukacyjne, współpraca rodziny i szkoły

Introduction

Migration is often analyzed in academic literature in the context of children's and youth education and the challenges associated with functioning in a new school environment. However, the topic of educating students from Polish families after their return to Poland is much less frequently addressed, despite its importance from the perspective of both the students themselves and their families, as well as the functioning of the education system. Children returning to Poland with their parents face numerous challenges, particularly those related to adapting to Polish schools and the Polish education system. Some of these challenges have been addressed in Polish education law, but these have limitations in terms of effectiveness and practical application.

The aim of the article is to identify and analyze the challenges related to the "return" to school in Poland and to the Polish education system, as well as to indicate effective solutions, both from the perspective of the school system and of child support at home and cooperation between the school and parents.

This article draws on the results of empirical research generated as part of a project on the school adaptation of children from returning migrant families in Poland.[3] The research focused on the students' adaptation process at the primary school level and considered experiences in both public and private education. Data from participatory workshops with teachers and parents, as well as expert interviews, form the basis of the analysis.

The term "school adaptation," crucial to the research presented in this article, refers to the general understanding of adaptation, derived from natural sciences and psychology, where it denotes the process of an individual adapting to changing environmental conditions.[4] In the educational context, school adaptation refers to the process of a student adapting to the requirements, norms, and expectations

[3] Research project entitled "School adaptation of children from returning migrant families. Perspectives of parents and teachers" for 2021–2026, led by K. Stankiewicz.

[4] J. Berry, *Immigration, acculturation, adaptation*, "Applied Psychology" 1997, No. 46(1).

associated with functioning in a new school environment.[5] This process is particularly evident during transitions between subsequent stages of education, but also when changing schools. Migration is a special case, which involves not only a change of educational institution but also a change of residence, sociocultural context, and language.[6] From the perspective of ecological systems theory, the process of school adaptation can be viewed as the result of mutual interactions between the student and the surrounding environmental systems.[7] The literature indicates that school adaptation primarily encompasses cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions, which reflect key areas of student functioning at school. These dimensions also provide an important context for analyzing the adaptive challenges experienced by students from return migrant families.

The article begins with a brief review of the literature on return migration and the education of "returnee" children in the context of educating other groups with migration experience. This is followed by a broader discussion of the research's methodological assumptions. The first part of the text, presenting the research results, discusses the challenges related to the school adaptation of children from return migrant families, organized according to specific thematic areas. It then presents recommendations for supporting students in their initial period in Polish schools, developed during participatory workshops and consulted with experts. The article concludes with a summary that relates the research findings to the relevant literature.

A student from a family of return migrants in the light of the literature

Return migration (also known as re-emigration) refers to resettling in one's country of origin after a period of residence abroad, although the length of this period is defined in various ways in the literature. A return migrant, or re-emigrant, is a person who returns to their country of origin after a period of emigration, regardless of the reasons for departure and return.[8]

It is worth noting, however, that the contemporary category of return is becoming increasingly ambiguous and analytically ineffective. Due to the changing

[5] S.E. Rimm-Kaufman, R C. Pianta, *An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research*, "Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology" 2000, No. 21(5), pp. 491–511, DOI: 10.1016/S0193-3973(00)00051-4.

[6] Cf. K. Stankiewicz, A. Żurek, *Children of Return Migrants in a Polish School. Linguistic and (Inter)cultural Challenges*, "Polish Journal of Educational Studies" 2023, Vol. 75, No. 1, DOI: 10.2478/poljes-2023-0009.

[7] U. Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*, Cambridge, MA 1979.

[8] W. Danilewicz, *Rodzina ponad granicami. Transnarodowe doświadczenia wspólnoty rodzinnej*, Białystok 2010, p. 99. Cf. R. King, *Generalizations from the History of Return Migration* [in:] *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?*, ed. B. Ghosh, Geneva 2000.

dominant nature of migration movements, and in the context of increasing mobility and transnationalism, migrations are increasingly less linear, leading from departure to definitive return.[9] Return, therefore, does not have to be the final conclusion of the migration experience, but can constitute one stage in an individual's migration biography.[10]

Return migration is a specific type of migration, as it involves returning to the country of origin and a familiar socio-cultural environment. On the other hand, people returning after a period of living abroad are no longer the same as before leaving. The migration experience influences their value systems, expectations, and perceptions of reality. Simultaneously, the country of origin is also undergoing transformations, although these changes may not be immediately apparent to the returnees. Returning undoubtedly requires reintegration.[11]

Re-emigration affects the entire family as a system and each member of that system individually, especially children. In their case, the very concept of "return" can raise doubts. Children return to a country strongly connected to their parents' biographies, not necessarily to their own experiences. It's worth remembering that some of them may have been born abroad or left Poland early in life. For younger children, before the decision to re-emigrate, Poland is often treated primarily as a place for relatives to live and spend their holidays and vacations. For them, it's an "unfamiliar" space, not fully understood, with which they have little emotional connection. However, young people who have grown up and attended school in the host country from an early age often feel "at home" there, having become familiar with the socio-cultural context necessary for everyday functioning.[12]

For many of them, their parents' return migration becomes simply a migration to a new place of residence, a new social environment, and a new school. It also means having to establish new relationships, adapt to unfamiliar cultural norms, and meet the requirements of the Polish educational system.[13] For this reason, when referring to children from returnee families, the term "returning student" is used in quotation marks in this text.

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[9] I. Grabowska- Lusińska, M. Okólski, *Emigracja ostatnia?*, Warszawa 2009, p. 323.

[10] K. Iglicka, *Powroty Polaków po 2004 roku. W pętli pułapki migracji*, Warszawa 2010, p. 10. Cf. A. White, *Polish Return and Double Return Migration*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2014, Vol. 66, No. 1.

[11] R. King, *Generalizations from...*

[12] K. Stankiewicz, A. Żurek, *From Poland to Germany and back: Return migration in the context of education – A case study*, "Acta Baltico–Slavica" 2025, No. 49, article 3477, pp. 5–6, DOI: 10.11649/ abs.3477.

[13] H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, J. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, J. Durlik, P. Szydłowska, (*Nie)łatwe powroty do domu? Funkcjonowanie dzieci i młodzieży powracających z emigracji*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 28–30.

The scale of returns from emigration to Poland remains difficult to estimate and monitor, especially since a large portion of migration takes place within the European Union.[14] The main countries from which Polish citizens return correspond to the most important migration destinations from Poland, led by the United Kingdom and Germany.[15]

Methodological basis of research

As part of a broader research project, this article aims to identify and analyse the challenges associated with a child from a return migrant family returning to a Polish school and to propose solutions that can support effective adaptation within the school and family systems, as well as cooperation between them.

The following main research problem was formulated: What are the challenges related to the school adaptation of children from return migrant families, and what solutions can support this process, taking into account systemic changes, teacher interventions, parental support, and cooperation between schools and parents? Specific problems, identified based on a review of the relevant literature, concerned specific dimensions of the challenges, such as linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological.

The data analyzed came from participatory workshops conducted in May 2026 in Warsaw, Poland, with the participation of fifteen people, including teachers, parents of returnees, and experts. The workshops served to gather participants' opinions, discuss the project's results, and jointly develop recommendations for supporting the school adaptation of children from returning migrant families.

Additionally, five semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with representatives of institutions and organizations supporting returnees and educating children with migration experience, including returning students.[16] All participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity during the presentation of the results to create a comfortable environment for expressing their opinions.

The data were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on identifying the main adaptation challenges and solutions supporting the school adaptation process of children from return migrant families. Analytical categories were derived from the literature and empirical data.

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[14] M. Dziekońska, *'There is time to leave, and there is time to come back'. Polish migrants' decisions about returning from international migration*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2023, Vol. 50, No. 18, p. 4, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2023.2245157.

[15] K. Stankiewicz, A. Żurek, *Children of Returning*…, p. 95. See e.g., current statistical data available on the website migracje.gov.pl.

[16] The group of experts included people working in teacher training institutions, involved in non-governmental organizations and conducting training activities.

Challenges in school adaptation of students from returnee families – analysis of research results

Based on the literature and the participants' responses, four main dimensions of the challenges associated with the school adaptation of students from returning migrant families can be distinguished: linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological. Interestingly, the workshop participants' responses made relatively few references to the cognitive dimension, understood as difficulties resulting from differences in curricula or educational requirements. It can be concluded that, from the participants' perspective, these issues are less significant than the challenges related to the students' linguistic, social, and emotional functioning in the new school environment.

Linguistic challenges

For "returning" students, language difficulties typically concern not so much everyday communication as the language of schooling and specialized vocabulary. Each school subject uses specific terminology that young people from returning families often haven't encountered before. As a workshop participant puts it, "The Polish language [in Polish schools] isn't the same as at home" [WS].[17] Children growing up outside Poland may struggle with writing, reading, and especially understanding more complex texts. Polish spelling and even calligraphy can also be a challenge, especially in the younger grades.

Understanding instructions in textbooks, homework assignments, and tests also poses significant difficulties. The vocabulary and grammatical structures used in these textbooks exceed the language familiar to the child through everyday communication. Language challenges arise upon returning to Poland regardless of whether the young person attended a Polish community centre abroad, although a Polish community education may partially mitigate these challenges. While children from Polish communities often speak Polish quite fluently, their language skills are not always sufficient for effective learning in a Polish school in the first months after the move. As one workshop participant notes, "The student knows the language [Polish], but it's not true that they don't need support" [WS].

Experts also point to problems stemming from language interference. Students draw on the languages they used in their previous education when attempting to formulate statements in Polish. As a result, linguistic calques emerge, a consequence of incomplete language competence.

One expert notes that "at home, the language of first contact with parents is usually Polish," and therefore, it can be assumed that the student "will have

[17] WS stands for quote from a participatory workshop.

a communicative knowledge of Polish" [EI2F].[18] This distinguishes this group of students from foreign children, for whom moving to Poland usually means entering a completely new linguistic environment. However, the respondents unanimously emphasize the significant diversity of "returning" students, also in terms of their Polish language proficiency, pointing to the need to assess these competencies at the initial stage of adaptation.

Cultural challenges

Workshop participants also identified a number of cultural challenges related to the school adaptation process for children from returning migrant families. One participant shared a reflection combining linguistic and cultural challenges: "Language is the biggest barrier. However, the second barrier we see is actually culture. And these things are closely intertwined. They cannot be separated" [WS]. Experts emphasized that difficulties in this area stem primarily from the experience of migration and affect not only returning students but also foreign children. For both groups, arriving in Poland and starting school in a Polish school may involve experiencing culture shock, stemming, among other things, from limited knowledge of the norms and practices of the school and social environments.

While children of Poles returning to Poland may learn certain patterns, values, and norms characteristic of Polish culture from their family homes and Polish schools, this doesn't necessarily prepare them for all the situations they encounter in everyday social and school life. One expert noted that returning students function "as if between two cultures" [EI2F]. During the workshops, it was also emphasized that "students bring with them cultural awareness, knowledge, and attitudes" [WS] formed in the country of migration, which don't always reflect the realities of Polish society.

An additional challenge can be the discrepancies between the image of Poland, formed during summer stays and contacts with the country, and the everyday life children encounter after moving. Polish schools, along with their norms and rules, can also differ significantly from those familiar to children in their previous country of residence. During the workshops, attention was focused, among other things, on relationships between students and teachers, emphasizing the cultural determinants of the degree of distance present in these relationships. According to workshop participants, this distance is relatively large in Polish schools: "Of course, in every school abroad (…) there are different relationships with teachers. (…) Well, in Poland – and this is not so obvious – there is distance" [WS].

The respondents also pointed to different communication patterns and differences in the norms and principles that organize school life. In this sense, school

[18] Quotes from interviews are marked with the following symbols: E – expert, I – interview; M – man or F – woman; the number indicates the interview number.

becomes not only a place of learning for students but also a space for learning and interpreting Polish culture, serving as a kind of "laboratory" for social life in Poland.

Social challenges

Another dimension of the challenges associated with returning to Poland are social difficulties, primarily related to functioning within a peer group. Changing country of residence and school requires finding one's footing in a new social environment and building relationships from scratch. As emphasized during the workshops, "children had to re-enter a new school" [WS], which meant finding their place within the class and school community.

This process can be particularly demanding, as children often enter a class where relationships between students are already well-established and informal peer groups have established structures. New students must not only meet academic requirements but also gain peer acceptance and find their place within the group. As one workshop participant noted, children "have to catch up on previous material and still find their social place in it all…" [WS]. Consequently, "returning" students may experience a sense of otherness and alienation stemming from both different cultural experiences and the need to integrate into existing social structures.

According to the participants in the study, "returning" students may be perceived as "different" despite their Polish citizenship and Polish origin. This difference can be seen in their behaviour, communication, accent, and social norms. In extreme cases, this can lead to stereotyping, ridicule, or exclusion from peers, hindering the process of adaptation and building a sense of belonging within the school community.

At the same time, participants emphasized that a child's positive reception by the school community significantly facilitates the adaptation process. As one expert noted, "A child finds it easier to engage in the learning process when there is a good atmosphere in the classroom and at school, and they are welcomed there. This learning process depends largely on the atmosphere built within the [class] team" [EI2F]. The research findings therefore indicate that building a sense of belonging and supportive peer relationships is one of the key conditions for effective school adaptation for children from return migrant families.

Psychological challenges

"Returning" students also face psychological and emotional challenges. Workshop participants emphasized that return migration is not limited to a change of residence or school, but is associated with the loss of their previous living

environment, social relationships, and sense of stability. For many young people, coming to Poland means leaving their perceived home and having to navigate a new reality.

As workshop participants noted, and experts confirmed, from a child's perspective, Poland is often not a country to which one returns. Therefore, "a returning student is very often not a returnee" [WS]. For many children, home is outside Poland, and moving means migrating to a new country rather than returning to a familiar environment. As emphasized during the workshops: "A child who grew up abroad, returning to Poland, thinks about returning to their homeland" [WS]. This is accompanied by longing, sadness, and regret related to the loss of previous relationships and a place of residence. One expert highlighted the consequences of such a situation: "For children [returning to Poland, moving] is a big deal (…), they miss their friends very much (…). After returning, the children often experienced significant repercussions, as they were supposedly so different…" [EI1F].

An additional burden is the fact that the child participates only indirectly in their parents' migration decision. As one workshop participant noted, "They're only there incidentally. They're only with them [their parents]" [WS]. The situation becomes even more difficult when the return to Poland occurs in crisis circumstances, such as illness, the death of a loved one, or the parents' divorce.

Workshop participants also noted that return migration is, to some extent, a crisis for the entire family, even if it was planned in advance. As one participant emphasized, "this situation is always, to some extent, a crisis" [WS], because it represents a change in the family's current functioning conditions. It is, in fact, "a change of place, of the context in which the entire family functions" [WS]. In such circumstances, adaptation involves not only finding one's place at school and in a peer group, but also the need to rebuild a sense of security and define one's own identity.

"Returning" students can't always count on psychological support in Polish schools, although it seems essential. As one expert notes: "And of course, in my opinion, psychological and pedagogical support is very important, and I also know what it looks like in practice… I mean, theoretically, we should take care of the new child here, but the school counsellor or psychologist has a group of children who need help. So, this child will obviously be one of many who needs help. (…) They are unattended" [EI3M].

Additionally, it's often assumed that children of "Polish parents" will cope with the adjustment on their own. Experts have even coined the term "silent needs," referring to students' needs that remain invisible to both the school and the students themselves. One such need is emotional support: "I think that these children returning have silent needs, in the sense that they [these needs] are less visible, if only because of the language, if only because of this… perhaps some kind of imperative, that you have to adapt on your own, that you're back at home…" [EI5M].

As a result, children from return migrant families may experience emotional tension, a sense of uncertainty and adaptation difficulties, which affect not only their well-being but also their motivation to learn and their school functioning.

Recommendations from parents, teachers and experts

Analysis of the material gathered during participatory workshops and expert interviews allows us to identify key areas of action to support students from returning migrant families during their initial period in Polish schools. It is worth noting that the recommendations developed by workshop participants largely aligned with the experts' proposals.

In the educational sphere, particular importance was attached to systemic support for the Polish language, encompassing both the development of language skills upon arrival in Poland and strengthening contact with the language abroad through Polish education. As workshop participants emphasized, "support in Polish (…) is extremely important" [WS], and language preparation can be enhanced through "ongoing contact with the home country [before return]" [WS]. The need for individualization of the educational process and the recognition of developing language skills as a responsibility of all teachers, regardless of the subject taught, was also emphasized. The need for "individualized education, an individualized approach to the child" and the fact that "we all teach Polish" [WS] were emphasized.

In the cultural area, attention was drawn to the need to prepare the entire school community to be co-responsible for the adaptation outcomes of children from reemigrant families and to develop intercultural competences for all students. The importance of counteracting stereotyping of "returning" students and building attitudes based on empathy and understanding their experiences was emphasized. It would be important, even before a new student arrives in the classroom, to "prepare the class to welcome this child" [WS]. This includes introducing the country from which the student is moving and working on stereotypes associated with it. One participant offered a specific suggestion: "I also imagine scenes in which, for example, a Polish child begins to speak with a slightly strange accent. And they observe how their peers react. And the child sees how someone with this experience [of migration] might feel. (…) It's about stepping into the shoes of such a returnee" [WS].

A key recommendation was activities aimed at building students' sense of belonging within the school community. The importance of supportive relationships with teachers and peers, developing empathy, and avoiding labelling young people based on their migration experiences was highlighted. As one teacher noted, "The group, the peers, are crucial. And here, of course, there's also the role of

educators, who can support this integration in some way, prepare the group for the arrival of someone who is slightly different and will also require this integration process" [WS].

The importance of psychological support was also emphasized during the workshops. It was recommended to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to students and their parents, create support groups for returning families, and develop cooperation between psychologists, pedagogues, and teachers: "We really need a team at school that is specifically attentive to these children (…), a team of specialists who would provide psychological and pedagogical support, and for [these people] to learn to cooperate, talk to each other, and share information about the child, but in order to support the child, not to label them, because that's often what happens…" [WS].

Experts also pointed to the need for systematic monitoring of a student's adaptation process, beginning with a reliable diagnosis. As one expert noted: "And I imagine that such a diagnosis, a kind of multidisciplinary assessment, is then carried out. Such a diagnosis should include: Has this student, for example, had any contact with a particular school? What system? What grading system? What is their language level? What is their communication level? What is their school language level, and so on…" [EI3M].

The final important area of activity is strengthening the competencies of teaching staff. Workshop participants emphasized the need to deepen teachers' knowledge of the specifics of return migration experiences and their role in supporting students and families in the adaptation process: "It's crucial that teachers understand their role. It's their job to prepare the ground for a safe transition for a child from a different culture, language, or just returning [to school]" [WS].

All the recommendations mentioned are united by the belief that effective support for students from returning migrant families requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account their educational, social, cultural and emotional needs, the cooperation of teaching staff and the involvement of parents, preferably before their return to Poland.

Conclusion

The results of the conducted research largely reflect the themes discussed in the first, theoretical part of the article. They confirm that the adaptation of children from returning migrant families is multidimensional and goes beyond issues related to educational achievement. This process encompasses the student's social, cultural, and emotional functioning, as well as their adaptation to the demands of the new school environment. At the same time, the research findings indicate that linguistic aspects are particularly important for children from return migrant families, as they

are for students with other types of migration experience. It is also worth noting that the study participants relatively rarely addressed cognitive difficulties and curriculum differences, focusing primarily on challenges that directly impact the student's daily functioning at school.

The results also confirm the conclusions drawn from the literature on return migration, according to which returning to the country of origin does not automatically mean re-entry into a familiar socio-cultural environment. For many children, "returning" to Poland turns out to be, in fact, a migration to a place that has not previously been an important part of their lives. Research shows that young people often operate between different cultural orders, and the adaptation process involves not only learning about Polish schools and their requirements, but also negotiating one's identity and building a sense of belonging.

The research findings also support the assumptions of ecological systems theory, according to which school adaptation is the result of mutual interactions between the student and the environments in which they function. Analysis of the empirical material shows that the adaptation process depends both on the child's individual resources and on the quality of support offered by the family, school, and peer group. The recommendations developed during participatory workshops and confirmed by experts emphasize the importance of comprehensive and multidimensional support, including developing language skills, strengthening a sense of belonging to the school community, emotional support, and close cooperation between school and family. The findings of the present study not only confirm conclusions reported in the existing literature but also extend current knowledge on the specific needs of children from return migrant families and point to possible directions for supporting their effective adaptation in Polish schools.

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