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RAISING VOICES IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGES: SELF-ADVOCACY AMONG SCHOOL-AGE UKRAINIAN YOUNG MIGRANTS IN POZNAŃ

PRZECIWSTAWIENIE SIĘ WYZWANIOM: SAMORZECZNICTWO UKRAIŃSKIEJ MŁODZIEŻY W WIEKU SZKOLNYM W POZNANIU

Abstract: Based on preliminary results from ethnographic interviews, group discussions and participant observation, this article aims to examine how Ukrainian children and adolescents attending schools in Poznań develop their self-advocacy skills through linguistic practices, including storytelling and creative social media projects. Rooted in children's rights, self-advocacy is defined as the ability to actively express one's needs, opinions and rights. This concept frames children as active agents in social processes, vital for their development and for counteracting peer-violence, including hate speech and bullying. Key research questions include: How do children with migration background construct their identity and present themselves in a new social context? How does this process affect the dynamics of relationships between children and adults in schools? Data from the ethnographic research are analysed within the framework of social identity. The study findings provide key insights into the challenges faced by migrant children in their efforts to integrate into the school community and provide information on educational strategies to support an inclusive environment in educational settings. Enhancing self-advocacy skills among children, especially those with a migration background, boosts their self-esteem, promotes conflict resolution and serves as a tool to mitigate aggression in schools.

Keywords: Education, Self-Advocacy, Children with Migration Background, Ukrainians, Education System.

| Abstrakt: | Bazując na wstępnych wynikach pochodzących z wywiadów etnograficznych, dyskusji grupowych oraz obserwacji uczestniczącej w tym artykule analizuję, w jaki sposób ukraińskie dzieci i młodzież, uczęszczające do szkół w Poznaniu, rozwijają swoje umiejętności samorzecznictwa (self-advocacy) poprzez praktyki językowe, w szczególności opowiadanie historii oraz kreatywne projekty w mediach społecznościowych. Samorzecznictwo wywodzi się z praw dziecka, jest definiowane jako zdolność do aktywnego wyrażania swoich potrzeb, opinii oraz praw. W ramach tej koncepcji dzieci są postrzegane jako aktywni agenci procesów społecznych, co jest niezbędne do ich rozwoju, szczególnie w kontekście przeciwdziałania przemocy rówieśniczej, obejmującej m.in. mowę nienawiści i bullying. Kluczowe pytania badawcze obejmują: W jaki sposób dzieci z doświadczeniem migracyjnym konstruują swoją tożsamość i prezentują siebie w nowym kontekście społecznym? W jaki sposób ten proces wpływa na dynamikę relacji między dziećmi a dorosłymi w szkołach? Analizę pozyskanych danych prowadzę w teoretycznym kontekście tożsamości społecznej. Wyniki badania ukazują kluczowe spostrzeżenia dotyczące wyzwań, z jakimi borykają się dzieci z doświadczeniem migracyjnym, starające się integrować w społeczności szkolnej i informują o strategiach edukacyjnych mających na celu wspieranie inkluzyjnego środowiska w placówkach edukacyjnych. Wzmocnienie umiejętności samorzecznictwa dzieci, zwłaszcza tych z doświadczeniem migracji, zwiększa ich poczucie własnej wartości, promuje rozwiązywanie konfliktów oraz służy narzędziem do łagodzenia agresji w szkołach. |
| Słowa kluczowe: | edukacja, samorzecznictwo, dzieci z doświadczeniem migracyjnym, Ukraińcy, system edukacji. |

Introduction

The integration of children and young people with migration backgrounds into school environments and host societies is considered a complex challenge. The more homogeneous a society is, the greater the feeling of exclusion and discrimination that newcomers to the host country may experience. Being perceived as Others, migrant children often become targets of hate speech or bullying (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, Sadek, 2010). This problem is deeply rooted in cultural, social and economic factors, and the discourse depends on the experience of a particular country in accepting migrants or refugees (Herbst, Sitek, 2023).

Self-advocacy among migrant children is a significant area of focus within childhood studies. This concept has emerged within the broader framework of children's rights discourse and the recognition of children as active agents in social processes. It encompasses their capacity to recognise and actively articulate their needs, opinions and rights – a process vital to children's social development, particularly in addressing peer-violence, including hate speech and bullying (Petri, Beadle-Brown, Bradshaw, 2020).

In this article, I explore how Ukrainian children attending Polish schools in Poznań develop their self-representation skills when faced with the challenge of adaptation to an educational environment through linguistic practices, in particular reading literature, storytelling and doing creative projects on social media.

Through ethnographic research, I sought to explore the question of integration of Ukrainian children into Polish schools, focusing on the strategies they consider successful. Additionally, the study aimed to examine the presence and dynamics of inclusion or exclusion within the school environment, particularly toward children with migration background. This includes understanding how hate speech is perceived, identifying the context in which it occurs, and analysing the roles of both the perpetrators and targeted.

The main research questions serving as a guide in this analysis are: *how do migrant children construct their identities and present themselves within a new social context,* and *how does this process influence the dynamics of relations between children and adults in school settings*?

I examine these questions through social identity theory, applying ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and focus

group discussion with migrant children and intercultural assistants in Poznań.

This research provides critical insights into the challenges migrant children face in navigating social structures and provides information on the educational strategies aimed at fostering an inclusive environment.

Existing knowledge

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to education, which should be directed toward the full development of the human personality, while fostering fundamental freedoms, and promoting understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations (UN General Assembly, 1948, art. 26).

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (United Nations, 2019) defines hate speech as *any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.* Bullying is a significant social problem which impacts children's psychological and social well-being, and typically is defined as a subtype of aggressive behaviour, and deliberate, conscious desire to hurt another person, when an individual or group intentionally and repeatedly causes distress or harm to a relatively powerless person over time (Aluedse, 2006; van Noorden, Cillessen, Haselager, Lansu, Bukowski, 2017).

Many studies have shown that Ukrainians, the largest minority group in Poland, have for a long time been among the groups most frequently targeted by hate speech. In 2012, the Local Knowledge Foundation developed an online database of hate speech, identifying six groups of people most often exposed to statements containing elements of hostility or degrading messages. This group included the Jewish, Ukrainian, Roma, African,

and Muslim minorities and LGBTQ+ people. Numerous studies were conducted on the basis of this database (e.g. Bilewicz, Marchlewska, Soral, Winiewski, 2014). For many years, the Union of Ukrainians in Poland has been constantly monitoring hate crimes and hate speech directed against the Ukrainian community, i.e., war refugees, emigrants from Ukraine, and the Ukrainian national minority (Związek Ukraińców w Polsce, 2024), showing a tendency to increase in both numbers and variety.

The sample and data sources

The analysis draws on data derived from 58 in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted with migrant children from Ukraine, teachers and three focus group discussions with intercultural assistants (IA) in Poznań. These interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian or Polish between February 2023 and September 2024, lasting approximately 90 minutes each. All children, along with their parents, were informed about the study and provided oral consent. Furthermore, the study incorporates insights from participant observation in schools and extracurricular programmes (Bertozzi, 2010).

The protagonists of this article are Ukrainian children and adolescents–both girls and boys–aged between 10 and 18, currently residing in western Poland. The majority attend Polish schools, while some are enrolled in both a Polish school and an online Ukrainian school simultaneously. A subset of students attend only online Ukrainian schools.

Currently, there are over 287,000 children with migration experience attending Polish schools (The Supreme Audit Office, 2023). Ukrainian children constitute the largest proportion of foreign-born children, numbering 248,000 (Bankier.pl, 2024), which is approximately 5% of the student population in primary and secondary schools. However, about one-third of Ukrainian

children remain outside the Polish education system (Tędziagolska, Walczak, Wielecki, 2023; Świdrowska & Stano, 2024).

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article is part of a larger study entitled *Good beginnings, promising futures. Children with migration background in Polish schools* exploring integration of migrant children in schools in Poznań and Wrocław and by extension in the larger Polish society. The study was undertaken from the emic (or insiders') perspective of different actors: children, educators, and child activists. In this article, I look at the strategies adopted by Ukrainian students for integration into schools and ways in which they facilitate or impede migrant children and adolescents' sense of belonging in the classroom and beyond. Scholars (Martin, Horgan, O'Riordan, Maier, 2023; Benmayor, Skotnes, 2005) describe belonging and social acceptance in schools as fundamental needs of children with migration backgrounds, influencing their wellbeing. However, educational integration may be hampered by bullying and exclusion. Strengthening children's self-representation skills enhances their self-esteem, promotes conflict resolution, and serves as a tool for mitigating classroom aggression (Thackeray, Hunter, 2010; Hlass, Harris, 2023).

Being a teenager is quite a challenge, but being a migrant teenager is twice the challenge due to the many physiological, social and cognitive changes that occur. There is also a shift in the way young adolescents think about the authority. Parents and teachers no longer hold the same importance and influence in decision-making as they did before. A characteristic feature of this period, apart from puberty, is the formation of the young person's autonomy. Numerous research show that giving teenagers a sense of agency in areas important to them (such as learning, dressing, and how to spend their free time) is strongly correlated with the development of key competences, including identity and self-esteem (Rutkowska et al., 2024; Lancy, 2012; Brubaker, Cooper, 2000).

Educational experts and practitioners emphasise that the development of the heritage language of migrant children should be encouraged for identity, cognitive, and emotional reasons. Migrant children usually speak more than one language, including their native language and the language of the host country. These languages are often used in distinct domains: the language of school education (i.e. Polish) and the native language for everyday communication (Ukrainian, Russian). Bi- or multilingualism can only be discussed when all languages are actively used in daily life (Błasiak-Tytuła, 2011, p. 60; Nott-Bower, 2020).

At the basic level, advocacy starts with communication, when one person or a group of people share information about their needs. This communication aims not just at influencing others, but creating the potential to make advocacy efforts more effective and efficient (Thackeray, Hunter, 2010).

Results and discussion

The results of the field research reveal that Ukrainian children are often "silenced" by teachers or their Polish classmates, and are subject to remarks such as *If you don't understand the rules, maybe you need to go back to Ukraine*. Additionally, my ethnographic findings show that Ukrainian children and adolescents are frequently humiliated for mispronouncing Polish words or expressions. During interviews with children, I primarily listen to their stories and experiences. However, at the end of each conversation, I always pose questions such as *Is there anything you haven't managed to cope with*? *Are there aspects of your educational experience that you unsure how to*

navigate? *Are you able to express your opinions and defend your rights at schools*? The responses vary widely. Many children mention having at least one trusted adult (oftentimes it is an IA) who explains what actions to take and why, how to proceed, or how to respond in challenging situations. Conversely, there are also accounts of teachers who say that *They don't have to explain anything* and suggesting that if children want answers, *they can look for them on the Internet*. Lack of support and language barriers cause children to seek escaping strategies, leading to truancy or children dropping out of Polish school and switching to Ukrainian online education.

Most children expressed no fear of speaking Polish with adults such as teachers, school administrators and intercultural assistants. However, they often reported being very apprehensive about speaking with Polish classmates, as they are often mocked for mispronouncing words, misplacing lexical stress, or choosing incorrect verbs. In conversations with Ukrainian children, an "avoidance strategy" emerged, humorously expressed in the phrase *Today I am not Polishing* (*dziś nie polskuję*). The term *polskować* does not exist in Polish, and represents a creative neologism–a blend of the phrases *to speak Polish* and *pyskować* (to talk back or respond arrogantly). According to the children, this term humorously conveys the sentiment *Today I don't have the strength to argue about the correctness of my Polish.*

16-year-old Mila said that sometimes her classmates *will not be satisfied unless they pick on her.* I asked why she was being picked on, and she responded sadly *I'm Ukrainian - that's reason enough to bully me. They comment on how I dress: if I wear designer clothes - they say that 'we're robbing Poles of social benefits', if I wear something simpler then they say that 'I wear second-hand clothes'. If we say nothing, they call us stupid, if we want to say something, we are always silenced.*

The research findings related to school-age children (Makaruk, 2022; Tędziagolska et al., 2023) align with the results of my study, and demonstrate that Polish and Ukrainian students often operate within separate communities. Conscious and planned efforts to integrate students occur less frequently than expected, contributing to the emergence of conflicts rooted in national differences. In this context, Ukrainian children are frequently targeted for hate speech or bullying. Notably, working with a multicultural class presents a significant challenge for Polish teachers.

Interviews with children who have a *double day*–attending both a Polish school and a Ukrainian online school–reveal the lower level of their integration. These students often lack time for a social life and tend to live in isolation. Conversely, IA provide the greatest support for these children, fulfilling multiple roles, from translation to explaining cultural differences or school requirements. These roles are crucial for the well-being and integration of students with a migration background. Lisa, a 13-year-old girl, reported that she was afraid to talk, because of the risk of making mistakes, but then her teacher told her that *a mistake may be a tool for growth, or a remedy for sorrow*, highlighting that *she needed to choose which one it would be.* This was a useful piece of advice, and helped to enhance her self-advocacy skills and made the decision-making process easier. She continued: *now, I can read books out loud, participate in creative projects and post about migrants' needs on social media, because it's about my own growth, not someone else's opinion about me.*

Conclusions

Ukrainian children face significant barriers to integrating into Polish schools, including limited understanding of the education system's requirements, difficulties in learning a new language, and instances of hate speech or bullying, which hinder their ability to express their rights, opinions and needs freely. While some teachers and IAs are perceived by migrant children as trusted

and supportive adults, reliance on limited adult support is insufficient for children's emotional and social development. Building relationships with peers, without division based on ethnicity or citizenship, is vital, as schools are the places where academic learning must align with the development of social and communicative competencies.

Self-advocacy can be cultivated by allowing migrant children to actively participate in creative projects, engage in public speaking, share experiences, or take part in storytelling. To be inclusive, educational institutions, in collaboration with local community entities, should make the value of education a priority, implement integrative strategies, and serve as an institution of trust. By offering pathways for migrant children to achieve academic success and building their confidence through multicultural events, where they may speak in their native languages or practice Polish freely, the educational institutions will support the holistic development of migrant children, ensuring they feel seen, heard, and valued.

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