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# Teachers at the Threshold of Migration: Perspectives on Belonging and Everyday School Life

## Nauczyciele na progu migracji: Perspektywy przynależności i codziennego życia szkolnego

**Abstract**

**Aim.** The paper analyses how teachers in Polish schools understand and perform their role towards children with migration experience. It focuses on everyday school micro-practices through which teachers support or hinder belonging, learning, and the implementation of children's rights in an increasingly diverse environment. The study is framed by ecological approaches, concepts of belonging and home-making, and research on street-level bureaucracy and infrastructures of care, with attention to the shift before and after the arrival of many children from Ukraine in 2022.

**Methods and materials.** The article draws on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with teachers and head teachers working in schools educating children with

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migration experience in Poland. The interviews concerned welcoming new students, communicating with families, interpreting and applying regulations, and rearranging time and space at school. The material was analysed thematically to link concrete practices with wider institutional frameworks, using selected concepts from ecological theory, belonging and home-making, contact theory, and place-based pedagogy.

**Results and conclusion.** The findings show that teachers function as key architects of school belonging and as street-level implementers of children's rights. They develop micro-practices of welcoming, language support, and emotional safety that can turn schools into laboratories of belonging; yet these efforts are fragile when they rely on individual goodwill rather than institutional support. The contrast between "before" and "after" indicates the need to replace *ad hoc* solutions with stable roles, routines, and resources that embed infrastructural care and make "being at home enough" in school a possibility.

*Keywords*: teachers, children with migration experience, sense of belonging, home-making, inclusive education, infrastructures of care, teacher agency, school as a site of integration

### Abstrakt

**Cel.** Artykuł analizuje, jak nauczycielki i nauczyciele w polskich szkołach rozumieją i realizują swoją rolę wobec dzieci z doświadczeniem migracyjnym. Koncentruje się na codziennych mikropraktykach szkolnych, poprzez które wzmacniane lub osłabiane są: poczucie przynależności, uczenie się oraz praktyczna realizacja praw dziecka w warunkach rosnącej różnorodności. Badanie osadzono w podejściach ekologicznych, koncepcjach przynależności i *home-making* oraz literaturze dotyczącej *street-level bureaucracy* i infrastruktury troski, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zmiany po przybyciu dużej grupy dzieci z Ukrainy w 2022 roku.

**Metody i materiały.** Artykuł opiera się na jakościowej analizie wywiadów półustrukturyzowanych z nauczycielami i dyrekcją szkół pracujących z dziećmi z doświadczeniem migracyjnym w Polsce. Wywiady dotyczyły przyjmowania nowych uczniów, komunikacji z rodzinami, interpretacji i stosowania przepisów oraz organizacji czasu i przestrzeni szkolnej. Zebrany materiał poddano analizie tematycznej, połączono opisy konkretnych działań z szerszymi ramami instytucjonalnymi przy użyciu wybranych pojęć z teorii ekologicznej, koncepcji przynależności i *home-making*, teorii kontaktu oraz pedagogiki miejsca.

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Wyniki pokazują, że nauczyciele pełnią kluczową rolę architektów szkolnej przynależności oraz wykonawców praw dziecka na poziomie *street-level*. Tworzą mikropraktyki powitania, wsparcia językowego i bezpieczeństwa emocjonalnego, które mogą przekształcać szkołę w laboratorium przynależności, lecz pozostają kruche, gdy opierają się głównie na indywidualnej dobrej woli. Kontrast między fazą „przed" i „po" ujawnia potrzebę przejścia od doraźnych, wyjątkowych rozwiązań do stabilnych ról, rutyn i zasobów, które budują infrastrukturę troski i umożliwiają dzieciom realne „by-

cie u siebie" w szkole.

***Słowa kluczowe*:** nauczyciele, dzieci z doświadczeniem migracyjnym, poczucie przynależności, edukacja włączająca, infrastruktura troski, sprawczość nauczycieli, szkoła jako miejsce integracji

## Introduction

The relationship between teachers and their pupils in a time of migration is one of the quietest yet most powerful mechanisms shaping everyday school life. In the space of daily interaction between children and the adults who accompany them, decisions are made that determine whether a child enters the classroom with curiosity or with tension, and whether they experience learning as an opportunity to act and explore or as a series of expectations imposed from above. Under conditions of large-scale displacement and mobility this everyday, often invisible machinery gains particular sharpness: every instruction, gesture and comment has to be translated not only from one language into another, but also from one set of norms, rhythms and expectations into a different one. Schools become meeting places between worlds, where small details — the tone of voice, the order of questions, the way a child is introduced to the class — work like a lens concentrating trust or dispersing it into misunderstandings. In this context the perspective of teachers, especially women teachers who dominantly staff early education and primary classes, makes the wider process of integration and belonging visible from within: they stand at the threshold where the institutional logic of the school meets the everyday logic of families who have just crossed a border.

In Poland this threshold has become particularly significant in recent years, especially following the full-scale war in Ukraine and the arrival of large numbers of children with migration experience into Polish schools. What for many years appeared as isolated cases — "that one boy" or "those two sisters" — has shifted into a durable, systemic feature of school reality. Teachers and headteachers have been confronted with multilingual classes, continuous enrolment throughout the school year, parents who do not speak Polish, and legal regulations that must be interpreted under time pressure. Although national and international frameworks formally guarantee the right to education and the prohibition of discrimination, the translation of these rights into everyday practice depends to a large extent on teachers' work in classrooms and staff rooms. This tension between formal guarantees and lived school reality forms the core problem addressed in this article: how, under conditions of intensified migration, teachers in Poland participate in creating or limiting children's sense of belonging at school, and what this reveals about the possibilities and constraints of the educational system.

## Theoretical Background

The study takes as its starting point a set of interconnected theoretical perspectives which are developed in detail in the following section. Ecological approaches to child development emphasise that what happens in the "in-between" space between home and school — in the mesosystem — is just as important as what happens in each setting separately. Theories of belonging and home-making invite us to see classrooms and school buildings as places where both the intimate feeling of "being at home" and the politics of recognising who has the right to belong are negotiated day by day. Research on teacher-parent relationships, contact theory, social capital and place-based pedagogy helps to conceptualise schools as potential "laboratories of belonging," where relationships, rhythms and spatial arrangements can either support shared life in diversity or reproduce inequalities. At the same time, the notion of teachers as street-level bureaucrats draws attention to the fact that they are not only implementers of regulations, but also co-creators of policy as it is actually lived in institutions.

Against this background, the article pursues three closely related aims. First, it seeks to reconstruct how teachers themselves describe their role and responsibilities when they work with children with migration experience, and how they understand the notion of belonging in the school context. Second, it investigates the everyday practices through which teachers attempt to make school a liveable and understandable place for newly arrived children and their families – from micro-gestures in the classroom to organisational solutions at the level of the school. Third, it explores how teachers navigate the structural conditions in which they work: the legal and policy frameworks, expectations of accountability and limited material and emotional resources. These aims are translated into guiding research questions: how do teachers in Poland experience and interpret the arrival and everyday presence of pupils with migration experience; what kinds of practices do they develop to support these pupils' participation and sense of belonging; and how do broader institutional and policy frameworks shape, enable or constrain these practices?

## Methodology

To answer these questions, the article draws on qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with teachers working in diverse primary and early education settings in Poland. The interviews were conducted in a period that allowed teachers to reflect on both the "before" and "after" of large-scale migration, and to Bronfenbrenner's trace changes in their own work, emotions and professional identities. The methodological approach, which is elaborated in the dedicated methodology section, makes it possible

to capture teachers' narratives about everyday school life, their strategies of improvisation and adaptation, and their reflections on structural limitations and sources of support. In this way the article does not speak about teachers and belonging in abstract terms, but reconstructs these phenomena from the perspective of those who live them in classrooms and corridors.

## Findings

By combining these empirical insights with the theoretical lenses outlined above, the article contributes to international debates on the everyday enactment of children's rights, the relational dimensions of education in contexts of migration, and the role of teacher agency in conditions of systemic strain. It shows how belonging and home-making are not decorative concepts, but names for the conditions under which learning and living together in diversity become possible, and how teachers' work at the threshold of migration both reveals and stretches the capacities of the Polish school system.

In theoretical terms, such practices align closely with the literature on "laboratories of belonging." Schools become laboratories when they are understood not only as institutions that implement regulations, but as places where people test, day after day, whether mutual recognition and shared rhythms are possible in conditions of diversity (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Pedagogies of place and home-making underline that it is through everyday repetitions—the way desks are arranged, the order of activities in the morning, who is greeted by name and who is left at the door—that space gradually turns into place, and that people move from "do I have the right to be here?" to "I know how to move here" (Gruenewald, 2003; Lefebvre, 2004; Massey, 1994; Tuan, 1977). In this sense, teachers are not only "implementers of policy" but curators of the micro-geography of belonging.

At the same time, schools are embedded in legal and policy frameworks that both enable and limit such work. In the Polish context, the family is recognised in the Constitution as the primary environment for the upbringing of the child, with the state obliged to support parents and protect the rights of the child (Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Constitution of the Republic of Poland], 1997). The Education Law further defines the role of the school as supporting the educational function of the family and ensuring equal access to education, also for children who are not Polish citizens (Ustawa Prawo oświatowe [Education Law], 2016). Specific regulations governing the education of foreign children (for example, the 2017 regulation of the Minister of National Education on the education of persons who are not Polish citizens) establish additional instruments such as preparatory classes, more hours of Polish as a second language, and the possibility of employing assistant teachers (Rozporządzenie [Regulation],

2017). On paper, these instruments form an architecture that should protect the right to education and non-discrimination. In practice, as the interviews show, teachers often encounter these regulations for the first time when a child with migration experience actually appears in the corridor.

This is where another body of theory becomes useful: research on "street-level bureaucracy" and professional agency. Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucrats emphasises that frontline workers — teachers, social workers, nurses — are not simple executors of rules, but co-creators of policy as it is actually lived (Lipsky, 1980). They interpret, adapt, and sometimes quietly bend regulations to make them workable in specific contexts. The teachers in the interviews are exactly in this position: they "bite into" the regulations, search for information on additional Polish lessons, negotiate with head teachers and local authorities, and invent templates or routines where none exist yet. One describes how, before clear procedures were available, she and the head teacher spent evenings reading ordinances to understand what could be offered to a newly arrived student. Another tells of "organising everything around" a Muslim girl's dietary needs and prayer times — changing the lunch menu, rearranging the timetable, talking with the class about religious diversity — long before the school had any formal guidelines on religious accommodation.

Such stories illustrate how teacher agency functions as an "implementation engine" for children's rights. The right to education and the prohibition of discrimination are enshrined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and in national law, but it is at the level of the classroom and the staff room that these norms become experiences: having or not having an interpreter for a parent-teacher conference, getting or not getting additional language support, feeling safe or being exposed to hurtful comments unchallenged. When teachers interpret regulations in a way that maximises inclusion — for example by using the full allowable hours of Polish as a second language, by creatively combining resources to fund an intercultural assistant, or by counting certain projects as language support — they effectively expand the child's "space of possibility." When they are left alone with conflicting expectations and too few resources, even the best intentions can end in symbolic gestures that do not reach the level of everyday practice.

The interviews also show a clear "before" and "after" line in teachers' narratives. In the "before" phase, migration was present but relatively marginal: a single child in a class, a family that had been in Poland for some time and spoke basic Polish, isolated cases of return migration. Teachers say that in such situations they operated largely on intuition and individual sensitivity. They had room to tailor arrangements to the specific child and family – to adjust homework, explain tests more carefully, or find a peer who could serve as a "buddy." They perceived these situations as demanding, but not systemically

overwhelming. Migration was an exception that could be managed through *ad hoc* care, informal cooperation with colleagues, and occasional use of external support.

The "after" phase, especially following the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, looks very different in their accounts. Suddenly entire classes or schools were transformed: several new students at once, multiple languages in the corridor, parents who did not speak Polish at all, and regulations that had to be interpreted under time pressure. Teachers talk about working "on emergency mode," about compressing learning into a day full of orientation tasks, emotional support, and bureaucratic procedures. At the same time, they also describe remarkable acts of institutional creativity and solidarity. Schools created preparatory classes, reorganised timetables, set up informal mentoring among teachers and students, and introduced bilingual information boards or WhatsApp groups to communicate with parents. The "after" phase thus reveals both the strengths and fragilities of the system: the capacity to act quickly and compassionately, and the cost of doing so without sufficient structural support.

Zoning in on the theory of belonging and home-making, one can say that in both phases teachers are engaged in the same type of work—making school a place where children can feel "at home enough" to learn—but the conditions under which they do this work change drastically. In the "before" phase, the main question was how to adapt the existing classroom to include one or two newcomers; in the "after" phase, the question became how to redesign the classroom and the school as a whole so that "home-making" does not depend on extraordinary personal effort. Belonging, in this perspective, is not only a feeling that teachers hope children will have; it is a property of the environment that can be fostered or undermined by organisational choices (Ager & Strang, 2008; Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021). When a school creates stable roles for intercultural assistants, sets predictable times for short two-way check-ins with parents, simplifies forms and translates them into relevant languages, and publicly states respect as a non-negotiable norm, it increases the probability that children with migration experience will be able to build a sense of being "at home enough" in the school.

Theories of contact and social capital help explain why these changes matter not only for migrant children but for the whole community. Allport's contact hypothesis and its subsequent meta-analyses show that intergroup contact reduces prejudice and improves cooperation when certain conditions are met: equal status within the situation, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In a classroom, this translates into tasks in which newcomer and non-newcomer students have equally important roles, shared learning goals, cooperation rather than competition, and clear backing from the teacher and the school for norms of respect and inclusion. Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital adds that communities need both strong internal ties (bonding) and ties that connect diverse groups (bridging) to function well (Putnam, 2007). Teachers are constantly mediating between these two

logics: they support the protective bonds of friendships and families, while also building bridges that connect children across differences of language, origin, or religion.

From a research perspective, the teachers' narratives confirm that when schools consciously design communication channels, rituals of welcome, and shared tasks, they are effectively setting up the conditions for positive contact and balanced social capital. For example, one head teacher describes introducing "getting to know you circles" where each child, including newcomers, shares something about their home and interests with the help of objects and simple words in both languages. Another teacher recounts planning group projects in such a way that language skills are distributed — one reads instructions, another draws, another presents — so that no one is left in a purely passive or tokenistic role. These are concrete embodiments of theory: they operationalise equal status, common goals, and cooperation in ways that children can feel and enact.

The interviews also highlight how strongly teachers' actions are shaped by their sense of responsibility for the child's well-being, understood not only as academic outcomes but as safety, belonging, and the possibility of "being oneself" in class. Even when resources are scarce and procedures unclear, this sense of responsibility drives them to improvise support. One teacher says simply: "I could not imagine that he would sit here for months and not understand anything. So, we started with pictures, gestures, and I asked the class to help."[1] Another emphasises the importance of emotional safety: "If she is afraid that someone will laugh at her accent, she will never raise her hand. So first we had to make it normal that we all make mistakes in Polish." Such statements reflect a deeply relational ethics that aligns with the child-rights framework and with contemporary debates on educational justice.

Looked at through the lens of equality theory and research on "deservingness," the difference between the "before" and "after" phases becomes even clearer. In the "before" phase, teachers often thought and acted in terms of individual deservingness: a particular child "deserved" additional attention or differentiated tasks because their situation was seen as exceptional. Efforts were tailored and one-off, relying heavily on personal goodwill. In the "after" phase, when the number of children with migration experience surged, such an approach quickly reached its limits. It was no longer possible to rely on individualised exceptions and heroic improvisation; teachers and head teachers had to ask more systemic questions. How can we organise teaching, communication, and support so that no child has to "earn" inclusion through good behaviour, quick progress, or particularly touching stories? How can recognition be a starting condition rather than a reward for adaptation? What structures do we need so that translated messages, accessible explanations, and time for questions become a standard, not a luxury?

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[1]    All statements have been translated by the authors.

This shift from exception to structure is perhaps the most significant lesson for the future. The "before" phase showed that micro-practices of belonging work: a well-planned first day, a trusted peer, a teacher who names and validates emotions, a simple two-language notice on the door. The "after" phase demonstrated that micro-practices are essential but not sufficient when the scale of migration changes. What is needed is an infrastructure of belonging: a set of roles, routines, and resources that do not rely on constant overextension of individual teachers but institutionalise the possibility of feeling and being "at home enough" in school. Such an infrastructure does not eliminate the need for empathy and creativity; rather, it gives them a sustainable framework within which to operate. It makes it more likely that when the next "before and after" comes—another wave of migration, another crisis, another policy change—the system will bend instead of breaking.

Theoretically, this points towards an understanding of teachers' work as a form of "infrastructural care." Infrastructures are usually associated with roads, buildings, or digital networks, but in social and educational research the term increasingly refers to the relational and organisational backbones that make cooperation and mutual support possible (Ager & Strang, 2008; Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021). Teachers in migration contexts are constantly constructing and maintaining such backbones: they create timetables that allow for extra language support without isolating students; they design spaces where children can rest and decompress; they coordinate with assistants, psychologists, and social workers to ensure continuity of care; they experiment with digital tools to communicate with parents who work long hours. When these efforts are recognised and institutionally supported, they can become part of a durable infrastructure of equality. When they are treated as individual "good will," they risk burning out the very people on whom the system most relies.

The perspective of place-based pedagogy is particularly helpful here. Place-based approaches emphasise that learning is always anchored in concrete time-space arrangements and that these arrangements can either reproduce or challenge inequalities (Gruenewald, 2003). The teachers' accounts show how much work goes into re-arranging time and space in ways that support, rather than hinder, children with migration experience. They talk about reorganising the timetable so that a child can have language support during subjects where verbal competence is less crucial; about creating quieter corners in the classroom for those overwhelmed by noise and novelty; about mapping safe routes to and from school with parents who are not yet familiar with the neighbourhood. These actions may seem minor at the level of policy, but at the level of lived experience they are decisive: they determine whether school feels like a maze or a navigable place.

Across the interviews there is also a thread of cautious hope. Teachers speak frankly about fatigue, frustration with bureaucratic gaps, and worry about the future—"We also have our limits," says one—but they also describe moments of genuine shared joy. A teacher recalls the day a girl who had been silent for months suddenly raised her

hand and answered in Polish; another smiles when she tells how the class started using a newcomer's first language word as a shared joke, turning difference into a resource rather than a stigma. One says: "At the beginning I was simply afraid – that I wouldn't manage, that I would harm rather than help. Now I know that we can manage if we get support and if we talk to each other. The children show us every day that it is possible."

## Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, these narratives and the theoretical lenses through which they can be read suggest that teachers' perspectives on migration are not only a window onto professional experience; they are a diagnostic of the school system's capacity for justice and adaptability. When teachers are forced to choose between curriculum and care, between formal compliance and actual inclusion, something is wrong at the infrastructural level. When they are supported to weave belonging, language support, and high expectations into the everyday fabric of school life, the chances increase that no child will have to live permanently "on the threshold" of the classroom. The future of schools in mobile societies will depend, to a large extent, on whether this weaving is recognised not as an optional extra, but as core professional work – and whether the necessary time, training, and institutional backing are provided for it to be done well.

In that sense, belonging is not just a psychological state but a condition of possibility for learning and living together in diversity. It is something that has to be built, maintained, and repaired – with words, objects, timetables, and relationships. Teachers, as the interviews remind us, are at the heart of that work.

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