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How Can We Improve Educational Experiences for Refugee Students in Poland?

POLICY BRIEF #14
October 23, 2024

Iwona B. Franczak and Amy C. Lutz

Education has a profound impact on students' life trajectories.¹ Schools play an important role in creating a sense of safety, stability, and familiarity in the face of uncertainty, especially for refugee students including the Ukrainian school-age children who fled the war after Russia's invasion in 2022. Loss of stability,^{2,3} changes to family structure,^{1,4} and limited access to education can compromise academic progress and socio-emotional well-being of refugee students.^{5,6}

International human rights treaties require all ratifying countries to provide refugee students with equal education.^{1,5,7} Yet, sudden and large waves of refugee children can undermine schools' ability to provide equal education for all refugee students. By the end of 2022, the war in Ukraine forced 8 million Ukrainians (mostly mothers and children) to flee their homes and led to staggering numbers of Ukrainian refugee students seeking education in other countries.⁸

This brief summarizes findings from [our article](#)⁹ recently published in *Sociological Forum*. We used data from 24 interviews we conducted with teachers and mothers of Ukrainian refugee children attending elementary schools in Poland to examine

KEY FINDINGS



The "radical uncertainty" created by war hinders school experiences of refugee school-age children and undermines schools' ability to provide equal education to all students.



School can play an important role in creating a sense of safety, stability, and familiarity in the face of precarity and uncertainty experienced by refugee students.



Educational policies should provide refugee students with reliable school information, support the development of school instructional materials in different languages as well as encourage hiring cultural assistants and implementation of the "practice-based" education.

the impact of forced migration on academic progress and socio-emotional well-being of refugee students. In the case of Ukrainian refugee students, Polish schools' ability to deliver equal education was challenged by (1) a language barrier, (2) school organization, and (3) uncertainty of students' living circumstances. However, schools that foster a sense of safety, normalcy, and stability^{1,4} can mitigate educational inequalities that arise from students' refugee status. For Ukrainian refugee students, Polish schools became a vital site of peace, incorporation, and certainty.

Uncertainty Hinders Refugee Students' Academic Progress

War and forced migration disrupt children's family structure and school routine. They also cause the uncertainty that undermines schools' efforts to provide refugee students equal education and compromise students' progress. Our data showed that refugee students experience "radical uncertainty"¹⁰ in the face of the instability of their living situations, the provisional status of their settlement, and the unpredictability of their futures. A primary school teacher, Karolina, explained how Ukrainian students "can live with someone, let's say for 2 months, and then they have to move out."

An English language teacher, Joanna, also recalled:

Today, I found out that one of my students is going back to Ukraine. The other one does not know whether she will stay in Poland or Ukraine or whether she will go to Canada ... The kids don't know what's going to happen [...]. Uncertainty. Are they coming back or not? Are they coming home?

Thus, the refugee students, schools, and the government are unclear on the level of investment they should make into the refugee education.

School Can Foster Students' Positive Outcomes

Despite schools being inadequately resourced to serve a sudden influx of refugee students, schools can foster positive educational and socio-emotional outcomes. As our data show, schools can create a sense of familiarity, certainty, and a path forward for refugee students living in the exile.

Providing Ukrainian students with texts in Polish and their native language fostered learning and familiarity. Bozena, a Polish teacher working in the school library, remembered how teachers in her school created picture vocabulary cards to help Ukrainian students learn Polish. She explained:

The vocabulary covers different topics—food, clothes ... and then ... questions are written in Polish on one side, and then on the other side, they are written in Ukrainian so students can peek and see what these Polish phrases mean.

Creative teaching methods also helped Ukrainian students learn the language and develop practical skills, such as using public transportation. Julia, a Polish language teacher, explained how she used a city map so students can practice using Polish language "as they move around [the city] ... at least with their finger on the map ... we ride trams and buses and buy tickets." Anastasiya, a Ukrainian mother, who never traveled using Polish public transportation told us:

The child has already told me [...] she learned how to travel when they used public transport with class. [...] The child is already comfortable and not afraid when using public transportation.

Implementing effective strategies such as providing students with texts in both foreign and native languages, using cultural assistants, or practicing newly learned skills during school trips can improve the educational experiences of refugee students.

How Can Schools Provide a More Effective Refugee Education?

The success of refugee education is a global matter governed by international treaties^{1,5,7}

and national laws.^{1,6} Our research shows that schools can reduce uncertainty and foster positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes for refugee students. Aligned with our findings, educational policies should (1) provide the relevant and reliable school information refugee students need to plan their educational futures, (2) support the creation of instructional materials in foreign and native languages, (3) encourage hiring cultural assistants, and (4) implement the “practice-based” education that can equip refugee students with the skills required to navigate their lives in the exile.

Data and Methods

Our data come from 24 interviews we conducted in Poland with teachers and mothers of Ukrainian refugee students who enrolled in Polish elementary schools. Interviews with teachers were conducted in Polish, and interviews with mothers were conducted in English, Russian, and Ukrainian. We recruited our interviewees with the schools’ assistance. The interviews were conducted in June 2022 at three public elementary schools in a large city in Poland. Teachers and mothers commented on educational experiences and needs of refugee students and shared their recommendations for improving the educational experiences of refugee students.

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