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Children of Return Migrants in a Polish School. Linguistic and (Inter)cultural Challenges

Katarzyna Stankiewicz[1] and **Anna Żurek**[2]

ABSTRACT

Return migrations are a special type of migration experience. Children from migrant families returning to their home country face many challenges when they start their education in a new education system, which often also concern foreign students. The aim of the article is to present the functioning of children from families of return migrants in Polish schools in terms of linguistic and (inter)cultural challenges, especially important during the first period of adaptation to the new school environment. The text is theoretical in nature and is based on the analysis of the available literature on the subject. The two types of challenges required to focus on the linguistic perspective, especially the glottodidactic one, and the pedagogical perspective based on the approach and research in the field of intercultural pedagogy. The analysis will allow to formulate conclusions important for the educational practice of children from families of return migrants, taking into account the specificity of this group.

KEY WORDS: return migration, returning student, Polish school, Polish language as inherited, bilingualism, culture, interculturality

1 Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland.
E-MAIL: katarzyna.stankiewicz@uksw.edu.pl ORCID: 0000-0003-0554-4261

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2 University of Wrocław, Poland.
E-MAIL: anna.zurek@uwr.edu.pl ORCID: 0000-0003-4216-3636

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Introduction

Return migration is a special type of experience. Returning to the country after a long period of stay abroad requires facing adaptation to new conditions, often even associated with culture shock. What seemed to be known, however, turns out to be different than years ago, among other things, because the returnees themselves are already different.

Admittedly, children from re-emigrant families do not always belong to this group themselves, but regardless of whether they were born and lived for some time in Poland or were born abroad, they face many challenges, the most important of which are educational, psychological, linguistic and cultural. The inclusion of children in the Polish education system is burdened with great stress and uncertainty for the whole family, and may also end up in disappointment for the student, caused by the inability to find themselves in the school environment and the discrepancy between his/her abilities and actual achievements.

The aim of the article is to present the situation of children from families of return migrants in Polish schools in terms of linguistic and (inter)cultural challenges, especially important during the first stage of adaptation to the new environment. A question will also be posed about the determinants of the functioning of a student returning to school after comming back to Poland.

The text is theoretical in nature and is based on an analysis of the available literature on the subject in the field of such disciplines as pedagogy, sociology, psychology and linguistics. The two types of challenges required a special focus on the linguistic perspective, in particular the glottodidactic perspective of teaching Polish as a foreign/second language, and the pedagogical perspective based on the approach and research in the field of intercultural pedagogy. Issues related to the education of the Polish diaspora treated as an important preparation for return, multilingualism of students and its limitations, as well as the formation of an integrated cultural identity will also be taken into account. The conducted analysis will allow to formulate conclusions relevant to the educational practice of children from return migrant families, taking into account the specificity of this group.

Return Migrations as a Special Type of Migration

Return migration (in the text this term is used interchangeably with the term "re-emigration"; cf. Danilewicz, 2010, p. 99) means arriving and resettling in the country of origin after some time spent outside its borders. According to the dictionary definition, the term "re-emigrant" can be used to describe "a person returning from emigra-

tion to the country permanently".[3] As already mentioned in the introduction, not all children coming to Poland.

Due to this diversity, the term "student from the family of return migrants" has been proposed in the title of the article, which is used interchangeably with the term "returning student", which is already present in the literature on the subject[4] (see, e.g., Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). It is worth noting that we can talk about some common features of children from re-emigrant families due to their upbringing in a Polish environment abroad, regardless of whether they were born in Poland or abroad.

Re-emigration is a special type of migration, because the return requires the family not so much to enter a completely culturally new environment, but to find themselves in their own country again, but with the assumption that during the migration period both the place to which they return and themselves have changed.

It is difficult to estimate the scale of returns, especially since it includes arrivals from other EU countries, which are more difficult to monitor (Dziekońska, 2023, p. 4; Anacka & Fihel, 2013, p. 1). The countries from which the re-emigrants arrive coincide with the main directions of migration from Poland, currently in the first place with the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Norway (see, omong others data, Central Statistical Office, CBOS).

While in the case of immigration it is necessary to indicate an important economic reason for the decision to leave the country, the reasons for return are of a decidedly different nature. Researchers on this topic (Cerase, 1974; cf. Trąbka, 2016) point out, omong others things, re-emigration as a result of failure abroad, accumulation of sufficient financial resources (or achievement of another assumed migration goal or a set time limit), willingness to use newly acquired competences and desire to spend retirement age in the country of origin. Studies on Polish re-emigrants discuss another reason, which is extremely important from the perspective of education, namely the desire on the part of the parent to raise and educate their children in their homeland (Dziekońska, 2023, p. 5; cf. Anacka & Fihel, 2013, p. 59). Return may also be a consequence of previous incomplete migration, which was combined with very limited integration while living outside the country of origin (Okólski, 2011, p. 19).

As the results of the research show, the returns themselves may also be part of the type of incomplete migration, which is then characterized by a certain temporariness. Re-emigration then becomes only a temporary change of place of residence

3 *A great dictionary of the Polish language*. Żmigrodzki, (Ed.). https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/70531/reemigrant

4 The term is used in the text regardless of whether the student is also a re-emigrant himself or whether he or she was born abroad and comes from a Polish family of return migrants. For this reason, the term is put in quotation marks, which are omitted in the rest of the article (cf. e.g. Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015).

and a break before the next stage of foreign migration in the direction already taken earlier or in a new one. The decision to re-migrate is influenced by the unsuccessful (re)integration in Poland. Krystyna Iglicka proposed the category of the "migration trap loop", which refers to undertaking subsequent migration departures due to the problem of finding oneself in the Polish reality (2010).

In the report entitled *(Un)easy returns home?* Hanna Grzymała-Moszczyńska and her team use the notion of the migration trap loop, bearing in mind the importance of educating the child of return migrants for the further decisions of the whole family (2015, p. 13). As it turns out, the durability of contemporary return migrations, which is extremely important from a social perspective, depends, among other things, on the course of the process of adaptation and integration of re-emigrant children in the school environment. On the other hand, the effects of these processes affect the intentions of re-emigrants to stay in the country or to go abroad again (cf. Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015).

The Specificity of the "Returning" Student Compared to Students with a Different Migration Experience

The migration and intercultural experiences faced by families with children may be of different nature, which translates into the student's situation at school. In addition to children from re-emigrant families, there are groups of children of immigrants (most often economic) and refugees (forced to migrate by external factors), as well as representatives of national and ethnic minorities and children from multicultural families (from mixed relationships, in which one of the partners is of Polish origin; cf. Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2018, p. 88; Błeszyńska, 2010, pp. 10–13). The situations of children from these groups are extremely diverse—there are different reasons for the child's family staying in Poland, as well as the conditions of its functioning in Polish society, and from the perspective of education, it is important whether the parents treat their arrival in Poland as a final decision (or refer it to a longer time perspective), or whether the migration is only temporary, which results in difficulties in building the child's motivation to learn Polish and other language subjects in Polish schools (Błeszyńska, 2010, p. 28).

Such an approach to the subject situates re-emigration among other migration experiences and indicates the importance of the child's individual experiences, shaped by migration, without analysing his or her legal status of residence, etc. (cf. Gulińska, 2021, p. 42). In this way, it directs reflections on topics related to language development and the creation of a child's cultural identity, as well as the challenges related to its adaptation and integration, understood in the individual dimension, taking into

account the linguistic and cultural aspect. At the same time, it makes it possible to relate the experiences and situation of a child from a family of return migrants to the experience of an immigrant student and representatives of other distinguished groups, which makes it possible to identify certain common conditions for school education resulting from entering a new linguistic and cultural system that migration brings.

It should be noted that the group of returning pupils is very diverse in terms of migration experience. Some of these children "experienced" migration only to a certain extent, because they left the country of birth in early childhood and grew up outside Poland (the so-called zero generation). The rest were born in the country where their parents settled and often treat this place as their first homeland, while Poland as the country of origin of their ancestors (this is the so-called first generation of the Polish diaspora; Lipińska, 2013).

According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of January 2nd 2015, pupils from re-emigrant families have the right to organise additional Polish language lessons, additional compensatory classes and learning the language and culture of their country of origin on the same basis as other foreign pupils. The regulation specifies the group of Polish citizens who attended schools operating in the education systems of other countries (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2015 poz. 31). Therefore, it is assumed that they may not be able to use the Polish language to a sufficient extent for effective learning in the Polish system.

As the results of the study show, returning students are often "invisible" to teachers and treated as "ordinary students". This approach leaves no room for the specific needs of children of migrant returnees, it closes teachers to the migration experience of these students and the consequences of being brought up in a different cultural environment and a foreign linguistic and educational space, which affects the course of the education process in a Polish school: "Treating returning students as 'ordinary students' depreciates their migration history, destroys the significance of cultural differences, the legitimacy of experiencing adaptation difficulties, etc." (Stankiewicz, 2019, p. 255). Teachers rarely notice the fact that students, only seemingly come to their homeland, where everything is close and familiar. The knowledge and cultural competences acquired in the country of migration of parents are not enough to make them feel "at home" in Poland. Students do not so much return to the country they know, "home" as they migrate to Polandabove all the homeland of their parents—they are therefore "hidden migrants". The migration experience, which is crucial for them, is not noticed in the school environment (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, p. 34). This experience becomes the source of the linguistic and cultural challenges indicated in the title of the article.

A Family and a Polish School Communityfor Re-emigration

Children of return migrants are quite a diverse group in terms of the degree of mastery of the Polish language, the development of particular language skills, the scope of use of the Polish language and the emotional attitude towards the language and culture of the country of origin (Lipińska, 2013). The attitude towards the country of birth and residence in this group is quite diverse and often changes over time.

Immersion in the Polish language and culture takes place mainly through the immediate family, in home environment limited to selected communication situations. Therefore, the Polish language mastered by the young generations is not always a uniform system, as it can contain many varieties, ranging from standard and cultural varieties to regional-dialect varieties and dialects of the Polish diaspora (Sękowska, 1994, p. 7). Depending on many factors, the level of Polish language acquisition in children from return migrant families may may range from very poor to close to that of native speakers.

The Polish language developing abroad can become a functional tool of communication in all spheres of life, provided that it is properly stimulated: "The preservation and development of the language abroad is influenced by factors such as: home (parents), contacts with the Polish family/with Polish peers, the Polish diaspora community, religion, Polish schools" (Miodunka et al., 2018, p. 30; cf. Lipińska & Seretny, 2016, p. 47). A special role is played by the home environment and educational institutions, such as schools and school consultation points operating at diplomatic missions and under the pedagogical supervision of the Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad, social Saturday schools run by church and non-governmental organisations, schools in the education systems of other countries teaching Polish and in Polish, and European schools (Miodunka et al., 2018, pp. 46–51). For various reasons, only some parents decide to provide their child with additional education in Polish in the Polish language system.

Depending on the acculturation strategy adopted by families (i.e. integration, assimilation, separation or marginalization), the process of transmitting the language and culture of the country of origin is different (Stankiewicz, Żurek, 2021). The situation of linguistic contact is conducive to the gradual loss of the not fully assimilated system of the Polish language, including on the morphological, syntactic and lexical-semantic levels. The regression of communication skills is often accompanied by the loss of the Polish national sense, which is in a way the result of the "strategy of escaping forward" adopted by the parents (Laskowski, 2009, pp. 18–20), which means giving up communication in the mother tongue and switching to the language of the country of residence. This not only has linguistic consequences, but also has negative consequences for the intellectual, emotional and social development of the child.

A child's language development is closely linked to the formation of their social and cultural identity. Thanks to conscious bilingual and bicultural upbringing, parents support the process of social integration in a new place, while taking care of the preservation and development of the language and culture of the country of origin, which turns out to be extremely important when deciding to return to Poland (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2021). As Stanisław Kawula emphasizes, the family becomes a kind of cultural community introducing the child to the world of language and culture (1998, p. 57).

However, children from families of return migrants are the least monolithic group in terms of transmission of Polishness. Younger generations brought up outside Poland may not know their country of origin well, as their experiences are often limited to irregular visits to family in Poland (most often to grandparents) or to their parents' stories about how things used to be in the past. On the other hand, representatives of the third generation—grandchildren—often feel the need to return to their roots, to the language and culture of their ancestors, which may sometimes be related to the decision to re-emigrate (Lipińska & Seretny, 2016, p. 49).

Learner Returning Between Languages—Language Challenges

A student from a family of return migrants speaks at least two languages on a daily basis. It is usually characterized by successive bilingualism, which arises as a result of the acquisition of a second language after partial mastery of the first language, or simultaneous bilingualism (much rarer), which means the acquisition of two languages simultaneously from birth. Due to the fact that the language of the country of migration of the parents is more advanced, they develop an unbalanced bilingualism of an impoverishing nature. The first Polish language does not have a superior function due to the limited scope of its use. It is the so-called "language in danger", developing in the conditions of multilingualism, which can be lost or preserved by undertaking appropriate educational activities (Laskowski, 2009). Such an opportunity to develop the first language is certainly returning to the country and participating in school education.

Research on the development of language competences in children of return migrants reveals various deficits in this area and the educational challenges associated with them. In the first days of their stay at school, the students of Polish re-emigrants seemingly do not stand out from the rest of the class. These are people who acclimatize relatively quickly to different educational conditions, sometimes needing speech therapy, pedagogical or psychological support (Białek et al., 2015). Parents often prepare them for their return to Poland talk about the Polish school, wanting to minimize

the shock caused by cultural differences resulting from different ways of teaching and requirements for different subjects.

Returning students speak Polish quite well, coping with everyday situations. Teachers begin to notice various types of deficiencies resulting from insufficient knowledge of the Polish language only after some time, especially in the field of the language of school education, which enables them to acquire subject knowledge. As Anna Seretny emphasizes, "LSE is a communication tool at school that allows users to transfer knowledge and verbalize it. It enables cognitive thinking, cognitive processing of concepts and phenomena specific to specific disciplines or objects" (2018, p. 143). The language of school education is official (as opposed to the language used in the home environment in exile), appearing in specialist texts containing abstract vocabulary and complex syntax. Such features mean that the Polish language mastered in the situation of Polish-other bilingualism turns out to be insufficient in many cases, e.g. when transferring the mastered subject knowledge with the use of limited linguistic means, which can prove frustrating (Białek et al., 2015).

First of all, there are difficulties in mastering reading comprehension and writing, as well as in understanding and using specialist subject vocabulary. Children who have not attended Polish or Polish community schools abroad may have problems with understanding the instructions contained in textbooks of various subjects (due to difficult vocabulary or complicated syntax), proper reading of digraphs and diacritics typical for the Polish language. There are problems with calligraphy, mastering Polish spelling rules, reading the teacher's handwriting, and thus taking notes. In older grades, it is a big challenge to write longer forms of expression, such as, essays or short stories (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2016, p. 119). People of Polish descent brought up in bilingualism often imitate the impoverished speech of their parents, have a slower pace of speaking than native Polish speakers, complain about difficulties with recalling familiar vocabulary (in their speech there is a frequent "I have it on the tip of my tongue" effect), make lexical, grammatical or phonetic errors caused by numerous interferences from the language of their country of residence (Żurek, 2018, pp. 27-35). Neglected and lost abroad, after returning to Poland, the Polish language requires regular learning as a foreign language, which evokes negative feelings in the users of the inherited language (Lipińska, 2013, pp. 130–131).

Therefore, in the first months of education, it seems to be of the utmost importance to properly diagnose the language competences of returning students and the language of school education, as well as to indicate potential differences in the curriculum (Ślusarczyk, 2014, pp. 75–89).

A student from a family of re-emigrants finds himself between two languages, and his or her bilingualism can become an intellectual capital rather than a burden, both from the point of view of the Polish education system and the student himself;

something that accelerates his or her comprehensive development, rather than inhibiting it (Libura & Żurek, 2019). However, it is necessary to support the development of this bilingualism in the course of school education after the family's return to the country.

Returning Student—(Inter)cultural Challenges

Returning student also faces many cultural challenges. After moving to Poland,not only between two languages, but also between two cultures. The child is torn out of a different cultural context; during his stay in exilegot to know cultural standards that were different from those in Poland. He is characterized by a different knowledge of the surrounding world and different cultural experiences than in the case of his monolingual peers from Using Geert Hofstede's concept, it can be said that the returning student has a different "cultural software" (Hofstede, 1991). It is only when studying in Polish school that he learns about the culture of origin in the dimensions that make up the school's everyday functioning5 (cf. Michalik, 2005).

After returning to Poland with his family, he is exposed to culture shock, generated largely by contacts with the school (Szybura, 2016, p. 114). The return shock may be stronger than the one related to the departure due to the family's expectations towards the Polish school and the adaptation process itself (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, pp. 20–22). As Hanna Grzymała-Moszczyńska and her team write: "Both returnees and the institutions that host them mistakenly assume that returning to the country will not be a problem at all or will be much easier than adapting to another culture" (2015, p. 20). The school environment becomes for the child first and foremost a space for encountering Polish cultural attitudes and norms of behaviour, represented by his peers of Polish origin, as well as teachers and other school staff (Michalik, 2005; cf. Janowski, 1995). At the same time, these cultural standards are also visible to some extent in the culture of the institution, which differs from what the student has known so far and to which he or she was accustomed (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). Therefore, the culture shock of a returning student also concerns the functioning of the school and the specificity of the school environment, what we can generally call the culture of the school. Discrepancies between familiar and new cultural norms hinder the process of school adaptation.

A significant dimension of culture, which is also visible in the field of education, is the power distance, especially in relation to the relationship between students

5 We can describe them on the basis of the dimensions of culture proposed by Geert Hofstede in his work *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (1991), such as: power distance, individualism—collectivism, masculinity—femininity, and avoidance of uncertainty (Michalik, 2005).

and teachers. Children of re-emigrants may have had the experience of learning in a school with a much lower power distance, especially if they come from Anglo-Saxon countries (Białek et al., 2015, p. 26). In Polish schools, respect for the teacher is required, resulting from his or her position. The student does not speak unasked, while discussing and arguing, and especially questioning the teacher's words, are not well received (Michalik, 2005, p. 136). Meanwhile, children from return migrant families who have experience education systems with a lower power distance are prepared for discussion and willing to ask questions. At the same time, they sometimes address teachers directly, without respect inherent in Polish school culture, which gives rise to many misunderstandings and is often associated with labeling the child as "insolent" and "arrogant" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, p. 23).

Another aspect highlighted by researchers of the functioning of children from families of migrant returns in Polish schools is the attitude towards cheating. Returning students often do not have a cultural norm related to permission to cheat and prompt at school, especially if they come from Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon countries. When they see that another child cheats, they report it to the teacher, which results in conflicts and negative reception from Polish peers or even rejection. On the other hand, the returnees themselves feel unfairly treated when, in their opinion, appropriate behavior, such as drawing the attention of the cheater, they are met with such reactions from other colleagues (Białek et al., 2015, p. 26; Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, p. 23).

Although teachers do not notice the otherness of the returning student, their classmates definitely pay attention to it, making this otherness also the subject of ridicule, jokes and insults, as well as the cause of cultural conflicts. We can even talk about peer discrimination based on the experience of return migration (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, p. 24). From the perspective of the Polish school environment, which is still dominated by cultural homogeneity, visible manifestations of another culture in the person of a peer coming from another country are still a great challenge, underpinned by stereotypes and prejudices (Dąbrowa & Markowska-Manista, 2016; cf. Popyk, 2023).

Meanwhile, the returning student, as well as his or her parents and teachers, face the challenge of harmonious identity development, in particular the formation of a multicultural identity, within which it is possible to coherently combine different cultural patterns, chosen depending on the situation (the so-called situational biculturalism). This type of identity facilitates successful (re)adaptation in a new environment and is linked to the integration strategy, preparing for other migration experiences and functioning in a multicultural society (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, p. 22). As Jerzy Nikitorowicz writes, "defining one's identity with one culture does not exclude, but even supports, identification with another" (2005, p. 44).

Summary

Returning students, although seemingly "unproblematic" from the teachers' perspective and not distinguishable from their class peers, are nevertheless different from children brought up in Poland. In many respects, their school situation is similar to that of foreign students, especially when it comes to limited competence in Polish. Children from families of return migrants, especially those who did not participate in the education of the Polish diaspora, may know the Polish language mainly in its spoken variety, limited to linguistic registers characteristic of everyday communication. Their knowledge of Polish culture can also be very selective and does not necessarily translate into the context of school functioning. When a child starts studying in Polish school, he or she faces a culture shock, and school adaptation is hindered by discrepancies between the school culture appropriate for Poland and the country of migration of the family.

At the same time, a returning student is treated by teachers as a "Polish child" who should easily find himself in the new conditions, which his parents know well. Meanwhile, they are somehow between two languages and two different cultures, which may be difficult for them to follow their education and function among their Polish peers. Failures at school, resulting from incomplete knowledge of the language, will give rise to dissatisfaction and frustration, and these are often the reason for the family to decide to emigrate again, which in turn carries the risk of being trapped in the migration loop.

The situation of "being in between" also determines the potential of a returning student, requiring support from both the school and the family. This potential is both multilingualism, which needs to be developed, and a multicultural identity, open to new experiences and dimensions. On the other hand, the child's effective school adaptation and finding his or her place in the Polish school environment, combined with educational successes that correspond to his or her abilities and potential, will support the process of (re)integration of the whole family after returning to the country of origin.

The analyses draw several conclusions for educational practice, both before and after the return to Poland. It is extremely important to prepare the child to enter the Polish educational system. It is not enough to simply pass on Polish as a mother tongue in the family environment. It is necessary to educate the Polish diaspora, which will fill the gaps in the child's knowledge of the language of school education and specialist vocabulary, and will develop competences in the field of written language. The arrival in the country itself should be preceded by appropriate preparations, both on the part of the migrating family and the school receiving the student. Being aware of

the risk of culture shock will make it easier to go through it, while preparing the class to welcome a new colleague will certainly prevent conflicts. This preparation should take into account the development of a model of communication based on dialogue in the school environment and the formation of attitudes of openness and respect for otherness (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 46). Teachers, and especially class tutors, may support pupils from a family of re-emigrants at the stage of school adaptation, taking into account their needs and limitations by individualising teaching and providing appropriate support, for example in the form of additional compensatory classes.

It is also extremely important to appreciate the child's potential, his or her multilingualism and multiculturalism, while providing assistance in developing competences in the field of Polish language and culture. A returning student is different, but this otherness is his or her wealth (and not the burden that hinders school functioning); it can be "tamed" and used in the course of school education.

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