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Invisible Children: Children from a Migration Background in Polish Dormitories²

ABSTRACT

The situation of children from a migration background in Polish dormitories and boarding schools is analysed herein. It is an emerging issue, practically absent in child studies in Poland. The author refers to research that is a part of MiCreate (Migrant Children and Communities in Transforming Europe) and demonstrates that despite the growing presence of migrant children in dormitories, they are invisible within the education system. The legal gaps in regulations applying to these children as residents of dormitories are explored herein, and integrative measures are analysed to find the possible causes of their ineffectiveness. The research was conducted in a dormitory in the city of Kraków. It included interviews with the institution's staff, participatory observations and autobiographical narrative interviews with students. This article may inspire further large-scale research into the problems of migrant children being present and living in such dormitories.

Keywords:

migrant children, dormitories, boarding schools, child-centrism, integration, Polish educational system

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2 Article was written as part of the “MiCreate – Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe” (2019–2022), a research and innovation project financed by EU Commission Horizon 2020 program under grant agreement no. 822664.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of dormitories and boarding schools in the Polish education system is rarely discussed in academia, usually limited to manuals or guides for educators or the personnel working for these institutions. Most were published in the second half of the twentieth century and are mainly obsolete (Węgierski, 1984; Kowalik, 1975; Smarzyński, 1971; Grądzki, 1990). It is surprising, taking into account the year-on-year growing importance of these institutions for children left in their custody without the care of their parents. It is more evident in the case of migrant children who are enrolled in Polish schools and live under the care of boarding schools or dormitories. The situation of Ukrainian children in Kraków's dormitories is partly described in an analysis made by Zustricz Foundation between 2018 and 2019. It had a form of a survey with the employees of dormitories, not covering any interviews with children. In this study, there is no information on how many dormitories' staff took part in the survey and if, in the part of the study concerned to parents, acquire any data from parents of dormitory residents (Pająk-Bener & Zapolska, 2019). When describing and defining children from a migration background, we need to realise that this group is diverse. "It is comprised of the children of foreigners: refugees or immigrants or emigrants, temporarily staying abroad and subject to compulsory education, and subsequently returning to Poland, or those left in Poland, whose parents emigrated for economic reasons. Each category of student has special educational needs that need to be addressed in the Polish educational framework (Chrzanowska & Jachimczak, 2018, p. 88). The research presented in this paper concerns most dormitory inhabitants, children from a migration background who are staying in Poland alone or under feigned custody contracted by their parents, with the limited presence of other groups of children falling under such a definition.

LEGAL REGULATIONS ON BOARDING SCHOOLS AND DORMITORIES

According to Polish law, school dormitories provide care and upbringing to children while they are studying outside their places of residence. Dormitories were created for pupils and students of schools at the secondary level (Polish *gimnazjum*) up until the age of 24. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Education of 2015 (Pol. *Rozporządzenie*, 2015), a dormitory should provide residents with 24-hour care, learning conditions, assistance in acquiring knowledge and developing interests or talents and enabling participation in culture, sports and tourism.

In this regard, it should cooperate with parents, schools and psychological and pedagogical counselling centres. The regulation seems to be paternalistic and referring to outdated parenting patterns. It creates an elementary unit in the form of an educational group, subject to assessment as to the degree of fulfilling certain, artificially imposed pedagogical assumptions. Yeromina (2016) defines boarding establishments as:

(...) establishments of a closed (half-closed) type, where the sphere of communication and activity of pupils is restricted, slowing down the process of the mental and social development of pupils causing the child's isolation from different relations”.

Furthermore, an appropriate schedule of activities and methodology of educational work has been developed for these groups of children. Provisions of this kind consider pupils' autonomy and maturity to a very limited extent, aiming at top-down management of their life in the dormitory according to imposed behaviour patterns. One of the disadvantages of these institutions is that they are obligatorily operated only during the school year, while the possibility of childcare during the winter and summer holidays depends on the governing body. The stay in the dormitory is payable but should not be higher than the costs incurred for the maintenance of pupils and the cost of food. This amount is determined by the school management and governing body. The internal organisation of dormitories is based on the statute of the governing body, the framework of which is set out in the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education (Pol. *Rozporządzenie*, 2005).

It should be pointed out that the already largely repealed Act on the Education System obliged the Ministry of Education to issue a regulation that would define the rules on the responsibility of management and educators in the dormitory for the safety of children. Unfortunately, such executive regulations were never issued, which means that there is currently uncertainty as to the extent to which dormitory employees are responsible for the social functioning of pupils. There is a general Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Sport regarding safety measures in educational institutions, but it only applies to events that take place on the premises of the dormitory or school or during collective trips (Pol. *Rozporządzenie*, 2020). It is unknown who is responsible for residents who temporarily leave the dormitory to go to the city, shopping, or work. This issue is critical for students' lives and functioning in boarding schools. The Regulation only mentions that in case of an accident to a person under the facility's care, an accident report should be drawn up and a commission convened explaining the incident.

THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The research presented in this paper was part of the MiCreate (Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe) project which is an international project financed by the EU Commission under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (Grant Number 822664). The Slovenian ZRS Academic Institute leads it in partnership with fourteen other academic institutions and organisations. Its overall objective is to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centred approach (Gornik, 2020) to integrating migrant children at the level of education and policy. Stemming from the need to revisit existing integration policies, the research project aims at a comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes of migrant children to empower them. The Polish part of the study was conducted by the team at the INTERKULTURALNI PL Association, and it was of a national scale at the initial phase, then limited for the purpose of an in-depth study to six schools in Kraków: three at the primary level, two at the secondary and one in a dormitory for students at secondary level education. This paper will present the outcome of interviews with dormitory staff, participatory observations and narrations interviews of dormitory students.

The dormitory selected for the study is for the children enrolled in different secondary schools in Kraków. It includes both Polish and migrant children and is part of a larger network of dormitory houses in Kraków. Most of the children residing there are unaccompanied by parents who live abroad. In the 2017/2018 school year, half of the children were migrants, whereas, in 2018/2019, this was one fifth. The boarding school does not provide classes to children but provides care and upbringing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It was chosen to show specifics of migrant children in Polish schools, often driven by a lack of proper legal custody, especially for adolescent youths. The dormitory is located on the city's outskirts in a mainly family and villa residential zone. It was important for the observation phase and interviews with the staff. Afterwards, the dormitory was relocated to the Nowa Huta district to a larger complex of dormitories and boarding schools spanning the whole district.

When the study started, the dormitory was inhabited by 111 people, 23% of whom were foreigners. It was important to include this institution in the study as none of Kraków's other schools, except international ones, had such a high percentage of children with migration experiences. The first stage of the research was dedicated to in-depth conversations and focused on the dormitory staff. Six persons were included in the interviews: the headmistress, three teachers, a female janitor and a secretary. The project encompassed a large part of the school staff to gain

universal knowledge about the institution's environment. In the focus interviews, seven teachers took part in a moderated discussion about integration practices, opportunities and shortcomings, as well as more general issues related to integration and migration policy. The next phase of the study came with participatory observations for 9 days, followed by 16 interviews with dormitory residents. All interviews were face-to-face but before the schools were closed due to the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. All respondents were Ukrainian, as this group of foreigners were the dominant group among the migrant residents. The group age was 16–18, six girls and ten boys. The gender difference was caused by the profile of the schools attended by residents, which were mostly vocational schools, usually chosen by boys. Only two respondents were not enrolled in vocational schools, one attended an international school, another a sports school.

OUTCOME OF INTERVIEWS WITH DORMITORY PERSONNEL

The dormitory staff has a positive attitude to the presence of foreigners in the dormitory. Teachers and other dormitory employees are sensitive to migration issues, but one of the most basic problems related to migrant children in the dormitory is the language barrier, often deteriorating the level of communication between these children and dormitory staff. However, some communicate with these children in Russian. School staff declare readiness and are well prepared to work with children from a migration background, and as one said: “For me, they are first and foremost all children, regardless of if they are Ukrainian or Polish; it does not matter to me” [S6E1]. Like other schools covered by the research, our dormitory had not introduced any deliberate integration plan for migrants. What is most surprising is that foreigners are placed in rooms according to their ethnic background, which might be helpful at the beginning but is not favourable for the long-lasting integration process with Polish peers. The idea is to change this practice for mixed rooms next year to facilitate integration, but the dormitory management expressed their concern for how Polish children's parents would react (not necessarily any concern about ethnic conflicts with peers) [S6R1]. Integration within the dormitory occurs through practical, everyday activities such as joint cookies baking or decorating. These activities might be considered child-centred because the idea and initiative for these workshops come from the children. The dormitory management also appointed a children's council, elected by the dormitory community, including migrant children. This body collaborated with the boarding school management and had the right to vote on various important issues. It also possesses advisory

duties uniting all members in the mutual goal of improving the social functioning of the dormitory. It has great integrative potential. Similar efforts are instigated by migrant organisations whose activities are prized. However, one criticism is that their activities only support foreigners, dividing the community by excluding Polish peers and causing conflict between students [S6T5F].

Despite a friendly attitude and attempts to integrate migrant children, when taking care of their well-being, respondents paid attention to the problems connected with the unclear legal status of these children and the legal gaps which have meant that the role of dormitories in the children's upbringing has not been properly regulated, especially when a child is temporarily outside the facility. Educators highlighted the great emotional need for close relations between students and teachers: "It is obvious that they need contact with an adult; it is important for them. They have no parents, these 'fake' custodians are absent, there may be a teacher in the school. However, relations are quite different, and the educator is only available during the day. The weekend comes and Ukrainian children do not return home, and then they come to us and eagerly talk about the ordinary stuff" [S6T1].

The most important problem observed by dormitory staff is that these children often live in Poland without parental guardianship. Theoretically, they are under the care of the so-called "representatives" based on an 'act of entrustment' signed by parents still in Ukraine or another country. Such a person is not recognised by Polish law as a legal guardian. In Poland, a custodian must be appointed by a family court with or without the parents' consent. This entrustment institution has become big business in Ukraine and Belarus. Such representatives are paid approximately €40 per month for their work. Some have over fifty to one hundred children under their care, which only translates to custody in name. It is often the case that parents never meet such a custodian [S6T3F]. The educational system does not allow the school to refuse to accept a child due to a lack of parental presence in Poland. All children of school age have the right and obligation to attend school.

Another problem is that dormitories and boarding schools often do not provide catering. "This lack of catering is a really important problem, we do not have a canteen. They eat badly, irregularly, and unhealthily. It refers to all the children but much more to Ukrainians" [S6E1]. They are also closed for the holidays and mid-term breaks. In the case of sickness, children should not be present in the dormitory. It means that the custodian should take over care of the child. In such circumstances, children are often left alone and live in rented flats, hostels or vanish, with nobody knowing what happens to them during these periods. There

are other implications of this problem. The relevant legal provisions are blurred, and there are no clear instructions of how to behave in these situations: who is responsible for the child's safety when it leaves the dormitory for shopping, leisure, or any other activity in the city. Nobody knows who should make the relevant decision regarding health issues, emotional or social problems. Teachers do not know anything about the child's past, making educational work much harder. Also, there are no instructions regarding how to react to social maladjustment or criminal activities of migrant children.

OUTCOME OF OBSERVATIONS AND BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

In the dormitory, despite daily routines that should have enforced interaction in common spaces, children from migrant backgrounds and Polish children used their own national languages even in the presence of peers from different countries. National groups stuck together and rather did not mix. In the dormitory of our study, children deliberately did not use the common spaces (daily room and kitchen) in the presence of peers from other countries. What is more, genders did not mix (they lived on different floors). Interaction between national groups was not common, usually initiated by individuals. Communication was basic, usually involving a mixture of simple Polish and Ukrainian words. Each group had its leaders who became agents of mutual contact.

Children from a migration background are satisfied with their parents' decision to migrate. Respondents see Poland as a better place to live and this new place is usually ranked as much more comfortable and better than what has been left behind. In most cases, the main reason for migrating has been improving living conditions. Children often speak openly about this if directly asked why they wanted to leave.

Other respondents in the study evaluated living conditions in Poland as good or very good. In contrast, most respondents living in the dormitory, in which living conditions are not the best, ranked them only as satisfactory. It must be noted that they live in rooms with peers of the same ethnicity, three per room, which does not foster the integration process. Contact with Polish peers is largely limited and takes place only occasionally. Most dormitory residents appreciated the support they received and valued the dormitory educators. However, they complained about the necessity to abide by the rules and the living conditions in the dormitory. It mostly concerned the 8 pm curfew (9 pm before the pandemic) and the enforced

hours for learning and homework. The dormitory residents liked Kraków, but did not necessarily like the district in which the dormitory is located. Many appreciate living close to the school. However, they do not feel completely safe living in this district. They came across unpleasant situations where they suffered racism from the locals. One of the girls who had an overall warm feeling towards Poland openly spoke about the racist attitudes of Polish society: “Well, in fact I like Poland very much. I really love this country. I like the language, culture, customs, heritage, and history, and also some other more cultural things, as my interests are connected to this. But sometimes I feel bad because of the people here because for these 3 years, now going onto four, I still encounter racism from Polish people, not only toward Ukrainians but also to different people” [08.10.2020.20M.KA.K18.UA.2017.S6].

Most respondents are actively engaged in different spare time activities. These most often include sports (this refers to boys in general), going to the gym, walking, watching movies, reading, less frequently artistic activities. Respondents do not mention spending any time with smartphones, which is surprising. It could be the case that this is so naturally integrated into common daily habits and takes us so much time that it is no longer considered a separate spare time activity but a form of addiction or behavioural compulsion. It is confirmed by many research results (Bianchi & Philips, 2005). The lack of possibility of training in a gym or engaging in many other activities caused by pandemic restrictions has been very frustrating for students. Some older respondents have complained about the lack of spare time as it has been filled by having part-time jobs such as distributing leaflets or working in the catering industry.

Most of the respondents prized the school as a friendly place. Foreigners were treated with interest and friendliness by their Polish peers. After a long stay in Poland and its education system, many respondents established durable and close friendships with people of their own ethnic groups and Polish peers. The language barrier was the greatest obstacle for inclusion, to begin with. “At the start, maybe it was hard, but why was it hard? Because I had this language barrier so I needed to learn first” [08.10.2020.7M.DO.M18.UA.2016.S6]. The other boy did not admit his language problems to his family: “Yes. It was hard to talk, and I did not understand a lot; well, yes, I did not tell my parents that I wanted to come back home, but I just stayed here, just lived, trying to learn this Polish language. It turned out that I stayed” [08.10.2020.9M.HV.M18.UA.2016.S6].

The family was extremely important for children who came to Poland without their parents and lived in a dormitory. Homesickness (and longing for their parents and siblings) was commonplace. A part of respondents felt a homesickness for the place they lived, family or friends, shortly after arrival to Poland. “I just wanted

to go to my friends in Ukraine. To see them. I saw the video where all of them are having fun, and I was just alone here in Poland” (19.03.2021.21M.IA.K13.UA.S6). These feelings were not long-lasting ones, as reflected by respondents. Students also encountered some minor anxiety and, more frequently, withdrawals from social activities due to inadequate language competences. One of the boys had persistent anxiety for about half a year (25.03.2021.35M.YR.M14.UA.S6). “Well, the first two years were hard for me. It was not hard for me that I did not have any friends here because I am the kind of person who, you know, can get along with everyone, that is, I communicate with everyone; I just missed my grandfather, grandmother, mom, dad and so on” [13.10.2020.16M.MM.M18.UA.2016.S6]. “I was 15 then and I wanted to see my mother all the time” [29/09/2020.15M.VA.K18.UA.2016.S6]. Children like these come under the supervision of a “legal guardian” (usually a person employed by the parents by contract). Such a caregiver may have, as already mentioned, as many as several dozen children under their care, which means that he or she cannot properly administer their duties, and the actual needs of children are not always important to them. One of the respondents says that her parents initially arranged for her to go to one particular school but she went to another because the guardian placed most of the children in another one. It was very frustrating for the girl: “I was without parents then, I couldn’t do anything alone. I was 15 years old” [29.09.2020.32M.DA.K17.UA.2016.S6].

Initially, most of the respondents felt alienated in the new environment, but the experience was not long-term. Very often in a dormitory, the educators even played the role of substitute parents for them. “Well, at fifteen I was a child coming to Poland without parents, and it was hard for me like I say that the tutors from the boarding school replaced my parents that they care about you, they ask something, do you feel well? How was school? (...) they just care about us so that nothing happens to us, that they know where we are and something like that” (13.10.2020.16M.MM.M18.UA.2016.S1).

All the children tried to maintain frequent online contact with their families. Some of them did so daily, contacting them via Skype or other communicators. All the surveyed children from this group returned to their country of origin or went to their parents’ places of residence (often a different Polish city) during holidays. The vast majority also met their parents during the winter holiday break (midterm break). Interviews with this group were conducted to some extent even before the pandemic struck. Along with the closure of the schools, dormitories were also closed. Children were practically forced to return to their country of origin or find other accommodation on their own within one day’s notice.

The majority of respondents identify with their countries of origin. However, most also declare some attachment to Poland. None of the respondents declared identifying with being Polish. It is particularly interesting that for our interviewees, ethnicity is something irrelevant. They use it for identification purposes, but this is just a label for them. They do not value such identification nor is it wrapped in some emotional or social context. Most respondents in this group are multilingual. Apart from Polish, they also fluently speak Ukrainian and Russian and other Western languages to a certain level. Problems with clear ethnic identification might be caused by the complex linguistic situation in Ukraine with many respondents using Russian and Ukrainian interchangeably in their homes and not being able to decide which language is their 'national' one. Respondents often had difficulties defining identity clearly, especially with regard to the attachment to a homeland or their new emotions about their host country because they were often torn between two countries and two worlds: "When we leave Ukraine – and some people agree with me – we no longer have a home. But when we arrive here it is still not yet our home, so we are somehow in-between" [08.10.2020.20M.KA.K18.UA.2017.S6]. Respondents practically did not take part in the activities of the migrant diaspora. There are several migrant organisations in Kraków, but respondents either do not know anything about them, or in only a few cases knew they existed, but did not feel the need to contact them. The situation is similar with the Orthodox community. They do not participate in masses and events organised by the church.

In general, this research group feels safe in Poland. They have a stable life and most already have defined their plans. They also feel safe in Kraków and their schools. There is one exception, however. They do not feel safe in the closest neighbourhood of the Nowa Huta district. Respondents are scared to leave their building after dark and are attacked by locals, often drunk and shouting racist slurs beside the dormitory building. "Yes, I feel very unsafe, and try not to go out after 18:00, even to the shop or to the yard" [08.10.2020.20M.KA.K18.UA.2017.S6]. There is also a problem with football hooligans in this area who are both nationalistic and racist. "Well, there is a problem with me being Ukrainian... it's all about nationality, history... this is this problem between Poland and Ukraine. Football fans have this problem" [08.10.2020.7M.DO.M18.UA.2016.S6].

Migration is usually perceived as a positive phenomenon, often also giving a chance to improve one's living conditions. It is seen as providing new opportunities. Migration is also supposed to broaden one's mind: "I think it's something positive because when you change your place of life, you get some new impressions, new friends, you get to know a new culture" (08.10.2020.10M.EA.K18.UA.2017.S6). However, one of the respondents felt frustrated with the fact that she had to

leave her country: “But also, I just still don’t understand, sometimes, not always. There is a question: why couldn’t my country give me the same diploma, so that they would accept it all over Europe and why, because I just know that from my parents, or other friends there, why I cannot get a normal job in my country? Also a normal paid for this” (29/09/2020.32M.DA.K17.UA.2016.S6). Migration is also often associated with some effort and sacrifice, although the scale of this effort may depend on the migration destination.

Respondents positively value their current lives and observed that migration had positively impacted them, giving them better life perspectives. They felt optimistic about the future. However, when the pandemic struck, they partly lost control over their lives, became frustrated and felt restricted in their freedoms. This positive view on the future is present every time they do not focus on the pandemic and the need to maintain restrictions or the probability of further spreading the disease. Some respondents do not see their future in their countries of origin, and despite the migration causing quite a stir in their lives, they positively appreciate the decision to leave their countries. “I missed a bit as I have siblings there, friends and so on, but the present situation is that, well, I just do not have a future there, in Ukraine” [08.10.2020.11M.NI.M18.UA.2017.S6].

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data gathered in the study revealed a level of satisfaction of the children living in the dormitory based on the emotional bonds they have with their teachers and educators, less frequently with their peers. They also feel good in their schools. It must be noted that Polish schools are perceived as more friendly as they build partnerships with students and appreciate their efforts, as opposed to Ukrainian schools, which are stricter and more authoritarian. Poland as a place to live brings them more positive emotions, and some of them see their future in Poland. There is a strong feeling of safety among the children except with regard to their neighbourhood which should prompt some community reaction to mediate the various racist incidents. Foreign pupils have limited contact with their Polish peers, which has not been facilitated. More efforts should be taken to make integration more effective and less time-consuming. There is no institutional support for integration programmes from the governing body or Regional Supervision Authority in dormitories, boarding schools, or schools. Children require such support, especially in their first months, when the consequences of detachment from families are felt stronger.

The greatest challenge that must be faced in any reform of integration policy with regard to the residents of dormitories is to fill the ‘gap of responsibility’ regarding the presence and well-being of children placed in dormitory care, especially concerning children exercising their freedoms. Policymakers should pay more attention to the activity of contracted custodians who enrol children into dormitories despite a tenuous basis for doing so. It is visible that even though the number of children from a migration background placed in dormitories is rising, in practice these children are invisible to the system. There are no systematic supportive tools implemented and their specific integration needs are largely ignored. Such support is of great significance as most children are not supported by their families, especially in the emotional or social dimensions. They have been left in a different culturally and linguistically community. Some more down-to-earth recommendations include the necessity of opening canteens and permission for the children to stay in dormitory care during holidays.

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