

Good beginnings, promising futures. Children with migration background in Polish schools

“Children are the future, and the future belongs to them.” In this project, we take a critical look at this oftquoted platitude and ask: which futures do migrant children embody, and what kind of futures belong to them? Formal education is often understood as key to futures of migrant children enabling them to re/integrate into the host society. Integration, however, is a contested concept, and what counts as successful integration often depends on gender and socioeconomic class, and differs depending on the perspective from which it is defined (pupils’ or educators’). Migrant children have legally guaranteed access to education in Poland, but many of them struggle to be included and to feel that they belong in Polish schools and the Polish society. Not all pupils are used to having foreign-born classmates. This is true in Poland, a country with relatively short history of immigration. Addition of newcomers to established classrooms poses pedagogical and behavioral challenges. In this research, ‘migrant children’ include children of foreign-born parents, born abroad or in Poland, children of Polish mixed couples that spent parts of their childhood (and education) abroad (returned Poles), and ‘repatriated children,’ i.e., children born in Central Asia who are being repatriated as part of state-organized programs for ‘Polish nationals.’

The main research question: What are the key barriers and facilitators, successes, and on-going challenges facing migrant children in their integration in and through schools in local communities in Poland?

Specific research questions:

- (1) Which main challenges to and facilitators for the integration of migrant girls and boys are inherent in the national educational, administrative, and monitoring systems?
- (2) What are the main barriers and facilitators for the integration of migrant girls and boys in local educational settings?
- (3) What are the curricular challenges and successes in integrating migrant children in public educational settings?
- (4) How do migrant girls and boys reflect on their experiences, aspirations, and expectations at different points of their education trajectories?
- (5) How do parents of migrant children perceive their children’s experiences in public schools?
- (6) What challenges do educators face in integrating migrant children in public school?
- (7) Which innovative and transferable practices have been developed and implemented in public schools?

The project includes research in western Poland (Poznań, Wrocław, Gniezno, and Gorzów Wielkopolski), where migration-induced multiculturalism is beginning to emerge. The project uses interdisciplinary research methodologies: participant observation and ethnographic interviews (hallmarks of anthropological research), focus groups and content analysis (derived from broader social science repertoire), and narrative inquiry (humanities). The project pioneers participatory research with migrant children, which will include eliciting narratives through innovative data collection techniques – short films, photography, journaling, daily texts – to accommodate the students’ modes of communication. The increasing attention to children’s rights and the involvement of minors in issues directly concerning them have led to a gradual methodological shift from research carried out ‘on’ children to research carried out ‘with’ children, and most recently, research carried out ‘by’ children. This project follows this methodological trajectory and includes adolescents as co-researchers. The project pioneers interdisciplinary research at the nexus of migration and education. Through analysis of multiple points of view of school children their families and teachers, and education administrators, the project goes beyond the current state of knowledge on migrant children’s integration in schools and the wider society. Given the inductive and iterative approach deployed in this project whereby thick description leads to the development of hypotheses and further research questions, the project will lead to further scientific discoveries beyond the life of this study.