Educating Migrant Students in Poland

ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to present the selected findings of the research carried out over the last decade on the situation of foreign pupils undergoing their education in Polish schools. The thesis being verified is that due to the lack of intercultural competencies of teachers, the educational institutions are not able to deal with the rising problems. Final conclusions point the necessity of changes in teacher training programs.

Keywords:
social inclusion, education, foreign pupils

Intercultural migration is a timeless phenomenon which has existed throughout the ages in all areas of the world. It is, however, usually triggered by two types of factors. The first type of them – the pushing ones – are those which motivate people to leave their current country of residence, such as persecution, armed conflict, geopolitical or economic processes, overpopulation, natural disasters or humanitarian crises. The second type – pulling factors – such as, e.g., the cultural and territorial proximity of the new country, the living conditions it offers, the existing legal regulations or a previously settled group of representatives from a given nation or ethnical community, are decisive when choosing a new place of settlement. The specificity of the post-war geopolitical positioning of Poland on the world map resulted in Poland being, for quite a long period of time, a relatively closed country, not very attractive to foreigners choosing to leave their own countries.

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The socio-political changes of the nineties, Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU) and EU regulations concerning refugees, have instigated an influx of repatriates, refugees and immigrants. Often, these people arrive in the company of family members, establish their own culturally homogeneous families in Poland, or take advantage of provisions allowing for the reuniting of families. In some cases, such as those concerning children-refugees, we are dealing with unaccompanied minors, who surrender themselves to the protection of the Polish authorities (Fihel, 2008).

The data collected by the Office for Foreigners, Ministry of Internal Affairs, indicates that at the beginning of 2018, there were 325,605 officially registered foreigners residing on Polish territory. Most of them are immigrants from outside of the European Union with either temporary residence permits (166,654) or permanent residence permits (60,785). The second most numerous category of immigrants consists of citizens of the European Union (92,521). The third and smallest category of immigrants consists of people who have been granted refugee status (1,348), who have obtained subsidiary protection on Polish territory, who have been issued either a consent for stay due to humanitarian reasons or a tolerated residence permit (4,927). It is worth noting that the national diversity of these foreigners is quite large. In principle, it is possible to find representatives from each continent residing in Poland. The largest groups, however, are those from the Ukraine (145,403), from Belorussia (15,493), from Vietnam (11,785), from Russia (11,420), from China (8,821), from India and Italy (both counting 7,973), from France (5,867), citizens of the United Kingdom (5,704), from Spain (5,430), and from Bulgaria (5,178).

Although the overall number of migrants settling in Poland is not very large, Poland faces the major challenge of developing and implementing of social policies facilitating the processes of migrants’ social integration. And, the one of the key methods of the aforementioned inclusion is the admittance of foreign children and youth into Polish educational institutions (Gmaj, Iglicka, & Walczak, 2013).

**THE EDUCATION POLICY FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS**

Foreign children’s right to an education is supported by both supranational and Polish legal regulations. On the supranational level these include:

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– *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Paris, 10.XII.1948), which states in Art. 26: “Everyone has the right to education”,\(^3\) and postulates universally accessible, free and compulsory education in the elementary stages;

– *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (16. XII.1966), which, in Art. 14, obliges State Parties to organise for compulsory primary education, free of charge and accessible to all;

– *Additional Protocol to The European Convention on Human Rights* (Paris, 20.III.1952), which states in Art. 2 that “no person shall be denied the right to education”;\(^4\)


On the Polish level, these rights are primarily regulated by *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland* from April 2, 1997. Article 70 states that “everyone shall have the right to education”.\(^5\) This law also includes the obligation to continue one’s education until 18 years of age (pt. 1). The term “everyone” refers to every person below the age of 18 who is living on Polish territory, regardless of their nationality and legal status (this, therefore, also includes unregistered immigrant children). The following points of this Article go on to describe regulations that are to ensure the implementation of this law:

– Pt. 2 ensures that education in public schools is free of charge, allowing for exceptions to be made in the case of payments for certain services provided by public institutions of higher education;

– Pt. 3 confirms that parents have the right to choose schools for their children and the right of citizens to establish educational institutions;

– Pt. 4 defines the principle of universal and equal accessibility to education and obliges the Polish authorities to establish a financial support system to assist pupils and students from low-income families.

The educational opportunities and forms of assistance available at the Polish educational institutions for foreign pupils residing in Poland are specified by the education law outlined in the Act of December 14, 2016 (Journal of Laws, 2017, item 59). It states that persons who are not Polish citizens, but who are subject to compulsory education, have the right to benefit from Polish educational institu-

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tions up to the age of 18 or until the completion of secondary school. The authorities of the schools to which such pupils attend are obliged to organize and conduct additional lessons, free of charge, of the Polish language, as well as – if necessary – compensatory lessons in accordance with the curriculum for a maximum of 12 months. In order to provide support for these pupils in their given language, the school authorities may employ somebody as a teaching assistant for a period of up to 12 months. Pupils who need the educational process to be adjusted to the specificity of their needs and possibilities, have the right to attend classes in the preparatory department of their school. In accordance with the “Regulation of the Minister of National Education from August 9, 2017, on the principles of organizing and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public nurseries, schools and establishments” (Journal of Laws from August 25, 2017, item 1597), school pedagogues are to provide pedagogical assistance, including aiding the acculturation processes.

In order to ensure that foreign pupils can cultivate their own cultural specificity, Polish schools may, in cooperation with diplomatic and consular institutions or cultural and social associations appropriate to the pupil’s country and group of origin, organize additional lessons in the child’s native language and culture. The other form of educational facilities offered to the foreign pupils is also implementing the curricula of students’ home country into the programs of Polish schools attended by the migrant students (Act of December 14, 2016 – Education Law [Journal of Laws, 2017, item 59, vol. 1; date of publication: January 11, 2017]).

THE SPECIFICITY OF THE SITUATION OF FOREIGN CHILDREN IN POLISH SCHOOLS

At least two categories of pupils undertaking an education in Polish schools can be distinguished according to the circumstances of their migration and their legal status to reside on Polish territory: refugees and immigrants. The immigrant group is made up of children of people who voluntarily migrated to Poland with the intent of either permanent or temporary stay. The majority of them come from Poland’s eastern neighbours (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). There are, however, also migrants from North America and from countries of Western Europe. There is an increasing tendency characterised by a migration from outside of our civilizational circle: from South and East Asia, the Middle East and Africa. During the past decade, significant changes have been observed in the ethnic structure of migrants. At the turn of the new millennium, the most numerous group was that
from Vietnam (Gronosz, 2009), whereas presently, the largest group is from the Ukraine.

The immigrants flowing into Poland vary in legal status (some of them have an unregulated legal situation), languages, religious beliefs, cultures of origin, social and economic status, levels of competency and qualification, as well as habitus formed in their countries of origin. They also have different abilities to adapt and assimilate into a new reality. At the same time, the problems experienced by parents and carers, as well as the attitudes they display towards Poland and their stay on Polish territory, are reflected in the behaviour of their children, shaping the children’s motivations and learning capabilities.

This situation is additionally complicated by language problems. When arriving in Poland, foreign children generally do not know the Polish language, or if they do, their knowledge of it is insufficient when considering the requirements of Polish schools. They all experience problems which accompany a change in life conditions and their social and cultural environment. Additionally, the older the pupils, the above mentioned difficulties increase due to the tensions which naturally accompany adolescence and to the processes of identity formation connected with this period.

Refugee children face the same problems. In accordance with the 1951 Geneva Convention, refugees are classified as people, who leave their country of origin due to “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

In loose translation, this also includes people who migrate due to threats connected with armed conflicts and natural disasters. In Poland, approximately three to four thousand people apply for refugee status annually. However, only a few of them receive refugee status or permits for tolerated stay. Pupils which fall into this category usually arrive in Poland accompanied by their legal guardians. There are, however, situations, when due to a lack of such guardians, the position of legal representative and carer of the child’s interests must be assumed by the authorities of the host country.

The specificity of the situation and way of functioning of refugees poses a significant challenge for educational institutions. The dramatic circumstances of migration, as well as the experiences gained while travelling to the host country, result in numerous physical and psychological functional disorders in the children, negatively impacting their processes of development and socialisation, as well as their learning capabilities and their ability to establish social contacts.

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Refugee procedures, as well as the long-term confinement to reception or care centres associated with them, generate a feeling of insecurity, limiting the children’s motivation to learn (Marek, 2009).

Due to the problems they experienced, foreign pupils form a group which is particularly susceptible to failure at school and to social exclusion. Existing studies indicate that the situation of these pupils in educational institutions is not very advantageous. The refugee child’s educational career is characterized by a relatively short period of education, often ended prematurely (Rabczuk, 2002). Among those who do attend schools, more than half of them do not complete compulsory education and half of them do not accede to the Polish language examination. Others encounter problems resulting from cultural differences, from the traumatic experiences of migration, from not knowing the Polish language and from inadequate forms of assistance offered by the educational institutions (UNHCR, 2005). Many also experience discrimination and aggression from their Polish colleagues (Kurowski, 2009).

The early recognition of these issues and adequate intervention could make it possible to support the child’s correct development and their educational career. However, due to the social and historical conditioning of the development of institutions in Poland, the realization of these tasks exceeds the work standards of Polish schools, and has become one of the greatest challenges facing the Polish educational system. Working with pupils from different countries sets a new task before both the school and the teacher, as it requires an understanding of the specificity of the functioning of these children, the development of intercultural competencies, the adaptation of the curriculum and educational methods, as well as of the evaluation process. It would also be necessary to take appropriate steps to create a friendly school environment for culturally diverse pupils.

The poor physical and mental condition of migrant pupils, the disruption of the processes of social integration, and an increased threat of marginalization and social exclusion generate serious threats to the educational paths of these pupils, as well as to their acculturation and social integration. This results in educational problems and impairs the relationship between the school and its teachers, and the pupils and their parents. Furthermore, they cause intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings, negatively impacting not only the work and atmosphere of educational institutions, but also – through the involvement of parents and carers – relations in the local community. Taking the above into consideration, we can see that it is imperative to initiate and systematically undertake work leading to the diagnosis and monitoring of the situation of foreign children who are undergoing an education in Polish schools, to adapt the work conditions of the educational
Educating Migrant Students in Poland

institutions so that they can accommodate for the needs of this relatively new group of pupils, and to develop the competencies of the people responsible for working with refugee, repatriate and immigrant children.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDIES CONDUCTED

The situation of foreign children in Polish schools was the subject of a study carried out by K. Błeszyńska (2009), and, more recently, a study carried out by M. Badowska (2017). For both studies, the survey method was applied using questionnaires. Their subject of exploration was to identify: 1) the situation of foreign pupils in schools, their problems and successes, 2) the forms of assistance offered to them by the schools, 3) the activities undertaken by the schools to aid the social inclusion of these pupils, 4) the cooperation between schools and parents, and 5) the support networks available for schools. Due to legal requirements, the studies included teachers, headteachers and school counsellors. The research carried out by K. Błeszyńska included 194 schools in which foreign students were undergoing an education, and that by M. Badowska encompassed 28 such schools. Both of these studies were conducted in Warsaw, where there is the largest number of foreign residents.

The data collected verifies that there is a large cultural diversity of pupils. They represent practically all continents and cultural circles, with the exception of Australia, New Zealand and South America. Chechen, Armenian and Vietnamese migrants constituted the most numerous groups. The category of refugee children consists mainly of pupils from Chechnya, Georgia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan. Only a few pupils fell into the category of child refugee.

The majority of foreign pupils were undergoing an education in primary schools. However, the number of children undergoing an education decreased as the ages of the pupils increased. The ethnical structure of the collectivity also changed. While primary school pupils represented a significant diversity of countries and cultural circles, no children of African origin were noted at the level of secondary education. The majority of pupils undergoing a secondary education were from Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Vietnam. On the level of secondary schools – attainable to only a few foreign pupils – there is, with a domination of Georgian and Belarusian youth. The most numerously represented groups on the primary level – Chechens, Armenians and Vietnamese – were represented at this level by very few individuals, predominantly girls.
THE SITUATION OF THE CHILDREN IN THE RESEARCHED SCHOOLS

The research done by K. Błeszńska (2009) and M. Badowska (2017) demonstrated that in spite of the generally beneficial educational policies, the situation of foreign pupils in the schools studied could not be considered satisfactory. The image that was formed was one of institutions with relatively small groups of very culturally diverse children, the majority of which have immigrant status. These schools generally displayed a positive attitude towards new pupils, and perceive their presence as a unique challenge and task. The respondents demonstrated neither a negative attitude nor fear. However, their task orientation was not accompanied by the ability to define what was expected of them. The respondents’ description was generally limited to “getting to know the pupils’ cultures”, “working with parents”, “adapting the teaching methods, curriculum and evaluation methods to the specificity of the pupil”, “creating a positive atmosphere and attitudes of tolerance”, “resolving situations of cultural conflict” or “ensuring various forms of support for foreign pupils”.

When describing the positive aspects of the foreign pupils’ presence in their institutions, the respondents mainly indicated the cognitive and educational advantages, such as the exposure of Polish pupils to foreign cultures, developing openness, tolerance and respect for others, and the cultivation of caring among pupils. In a few cases, other benefits were also listed, mainly securing school interests and an improvement in the work conditions of the teachers employed (preventing the closure of schools, eliminating the need for composite classes).

The negative aspects listed included communication issues and the problems related to these issues when creating relationships and attempting to cooperate with pupils and their parents, the possible occurrence of cultural conflicts, the ethnicization of the school, the triggering of intolerance and xenophobia in Polish pupils, difficulties in conducting lessons, lowering the learning level of the class, as well as other pedagogic problems resulting from the different habitus of the pupils. The respondents often mentioned inadequate behaviour towards both teachers and other pupils, as well as problems associated with enculturation and the understanding of the rules functioning in Polish schools, learning problems, the social isolation of foreign pupils and the difficulties in conducting lessons due to the necessity to give constant assistance to these pupils.

The respondents also demonstrated a relatively weak knowledge of the educational policies concerning the education of foreign pupils, a lack of general knowledge concerning cultural differences, the specificity of immigration and refugee problems and an insufficient understanding of the pupils themselves. Not all of
them were aware of the countries of origin of their pupils, what their cultural specificity was or what religion they adhered to. However, foreign pupils were generally perceived as diligent, hard-working and highly motivated to learn. Their main basic problems were identified as being a difficult financial situation, a poor knowledge of the Polish language and culture, varied educational experiences and a lack of knowledge. Some teachers indicated that pupils failed to adapt to the expectations of Polish schools and that they displayed inadequate behavior towards Polish customs.

The relations with the group of Polish pupils was more positively assessed. While describing the attitudes of Polish pupils towards foreign pupils, the respondents indicated more positive behaviours (such as curiosity, sincerity, willingness to cooperate and to bring help, as well as the inclusion in joint activities and games) than negative ones (fear, resentment, physical and symbolic aggression, as well as discriminatory behaviour and mobbing). The positive reactions of the Polish pupils did not, however, mean the full inclusion of migrant children into their peer groups. The respondent teachers estimated this level as “average” (the assessment of the level of integration when considering cooperation in the classroom, out-of-school contacts, and participation in joint events) and “low” (involvement in children and youth organizations, as well as in the school’s pupil self-governing body). The majority of the positive assessments were characterized by integration through common sports activities and making friendships with Polish pupils.

The respondents indicated language, cultural and religious barriers as the factors responsible for limiting the integration of foreign pupils into the school environment, as well as the incompetence or a lack of understanding on the part of the educational authorities, stereotypes and ethnic and racial prejudices functioning in the minds of the pupils and within their environment. In a few responses, different religious practices, racism, as well as conflicts and tensions caused by cultural diversity were also mentioned.

Also, there was a low level of involvement of foreign pupils in school life. Most often, they were being engaged in school events or requested to undertake certain duties for the school. They would sporadically participate in extracurricular activities organised to develop the pupils’ abilities and interests, or in the pupil self-governing body and in student organizations operating within the school. Foreign pupils would also occasionally be given the possibility to present their own cultures to their peers, either in the classroom or in front of the school.

Cooperation with foreign parents was most neglected by the schools. The respondents indicated that their experience of these types of relationships was not very positive. Parents were perceived as people with whom it was difficult
to communicate due to their lack of knowledge of the Polish language, and with whom relationships were difficult, as they did not understand Poland, the culture or the reality. These parents often experienced legal and economic problems, had difficulties understanding the school’s expectations, and were not very willing to form relationships with the school or to participate in school life, neither were they very willing to cooperate with other parents. However, this critical outlook on the parents’ attitude was not accompanied by any attempts to understand the reasons behind the problems which were arising, nor were any attempts made to undertake steps aiming to increase the parents’ commitment to the cooperation. The respondents rarely met with the parents and these meetings were limited to individual talks within school grounds. In spite of the legal barriers, the respondents infrequently visited the pupils’ homes (such visits are forbidden in Poland).

The people included in the studies were aware of the commitments the schools have towards foreign pupils. They did not, however, feel competent to diagnose the situation and the individual needs of the children. The forms of support offered to the children and the means used to solve the above mentioned problems were limited and not really individualised. The most frequently mentioned means of support were: financial aid, extra Polish culture and language lessons, taking the pupil’s level of knowledge of the Polish language into consideration when marking tests or carrying out other forms of student evaluation, psychological help, help with homework, as well as giving them access to both an interpreter and a lawyer.

Within the schools being researched, the programs implemented to aid social inclusion were not very developed. Group work, collaborative learning, games, events and trips were indicated as effective ways of supporting the integration processes. Many of the respondents, especially in the category of school headteachers, did not distinguish between integration programs and support programs.

Very few of the schools being studied also fulfilled the requirements of a multicultural school, such as, for example, accommodating for the pupils’ cultures in the curriculum and in educational programs (Gundara, 2000). References to the foreign students’ cultures were very scarce and random. The Global Education Program, which has been in force in all schools in Poland since 2009 (including the fundamental components of the Intercultural Education and Education for Peace), has only been implemented in a few of the researched institutions. Classes on Civic Education often omitted the issues of migration, multicultural societies, combating racism, ethnic prejudices and discrimination.

Dealing with the problems of the pupils’ cultural diversity requires, according to the respondents, special qualifications and predispositions, including; the
knowledge of foreign languages, the awareness of the legal regulations concerning the situation of foreign pupils, cultural skills, being competent to work with refugees, being open, patient, empathetic and tolerant. The respondents had gained these competencies in numerous ways – they were very rarely acquired in the course of their teacher training. More often – through self-education and participation in various courses, workshops and seminars, usually organised by non-governmental organisations. However, most of the respondents admitted that they had never partaken in such courses. Only twenty percent of the respondents had undergone specialist training.

The limited possibilities of developing the competencies needed for working with culturally diverse pupils are reflected in the self-evaluation of those being studied. They assessed their own preparation for working with foreign pupils as quite low. Most of them considered their training as either weak or non-existent. Approximately 50% of the school headteachers also admitted a lack of sufficient knowledge concerning legal regulations.

The feeling of having insufficient training, in most of the respondents, was accompanied by a sense of isolation in the face of the problems resulting from the presence of foreign pupils. Despite the large number of institutions dealing with immigrants and refugees, the presence of a psychologist in the majority of the institutions studied, or even the generally easy access to services provided by psychological and pedagogical clinics, both headteachers and teachers, as well as school counsellors, indicated that there were practically no possibilities of obtaining help in situations which exceeded the competencies of those employed (i.e., most of the respondents). These feelings were very subjective and resulted rather from a lack of cooperation with institutions which would have been able to fulfil these expectations for support (such as MEN, UNHCR, or the Office for Foreigners), the underuse of the local community’s potential and a limited cooperation with non-governmental organisations, than from an actual absence of such possibilities. This situation results mainly from the respondents being insufficiently informed about the existing possibilities. Also, not all the institutions that should have been able to help the schools, namely their most basic partners, such as psychological and pedagogical clinics, proved to be competent and willing to do so.

In both of the studies conducted, large differences were found when comparing the three occupational groups represented by the respondents: school headteachers, teachers and school counsellors. The group which was relatively better informed about the specificity of foreign pupils undergoing an education in a given school were the headteachers. The group of teachers gave the most positive assessment of these pupils, and were characterised as being the most open and
willing to cooperate and to bring support. The least informed of the occupational groups, which also had the most negative opinion of foreign pupils and who were least open to contacts with them and least willing to bring them help, were the school counsellors. Paradoxically, representatives of this group also claimed to be best prepared to work with foreign pupils. The respondents identified three areas for improvement.

The respondents, aware of the insufficient work being done with the foreign pupils, put forward numerous recommendations on how to improve the existing situation. From the suggestions presented, three courses of action were identified. The first of these – which focused on the foreign pupils and their parents – included a more efficient financial support system, systematic and easy access to help in learning the Polish language and culture, improving the available psychological support, developing more systematic integration activities, improving parenting skills and creating an attitude of tolerance among Polish pupils. The second course of action focused on activities which would expand the support network for school staff and improve their competencies. This mainly included making it easier for the schools to cooperate with institutions which would be able to provide support, as well as making various forms of extra training and means of acquiring knowledge available to the school staff. The preferred forms of help included an improvement of the legal regulations, the work of psychological and pedagogical clinics, and training for the management. Methodological guides and extra training for teachers and pedagogues was not met with much enthusiasm, and even less was shown for teacher advisors.

The interests of the respondents varied according to the positions they held. In the group of headteachers, foreign language courses were in highest demand, as was training concerning the legal basis for working with refugees and immigrants. The teachers who participated in the studies generally showed less enthusiasm for forms of support which exceeded methodological guides. They did, on the other hand, show an interest in participating in support groups for teachers with similar problems and in consultations with psychologists. The pedagogues interviewed were enthusiastic towards practically all forms of possible support and additional training. They were particularly interested in: access to methodological essays and guides, the possibilities of being able to consult specialists (psychologists and others), participation in courses and training, cooperation with a teacher advisor specialised in the issues being discussed.

The third area identified for improvement included recommendations of an institutional nature. The respondents suggested the appointment of various bodies and positions which would fill in the gaps in the schools’ and teachers’ support
networks, such as the appointment of a coordinator for working with refugee families, or of intermediaries and assistants from among the migrants, or the organizing of a Parent Committee made up of the parents of foreign children, and the developing of forms of cooperation between Councils and educational institutions. Attention was also brought to the necessity to improve the existing legal regulations and to prepare the schools for the acceptance of foreign pupils before such a situation arises.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the studies conducted, it is possible to conclude that despite of the fact that the investigated schools found themselves in an unexpected situation for which they were unprepared, they have undertaken the new tasks and challenges that have come with the education of foreign pupils. Unfortunately, they are not managing these tasks very well. The competencies that the teachers and school counsellors had gained during their university studies do not coincide with those required by the relatively new educational policies. The education and further training programs for teachers, school counsellors and psychologists are most in need of change, as, until now, they have marginalised the issues of culturally diverse children. As the report prepared for the European Commission indicates, the improvement of the multicultural competencies of future teachers, their ability to work with a culturally diverse class or their ability to understand the social and psychological problems experienced by refugees and immigrants (Public Policy and Management Institute, 2017) is virtually absent in Polish primary school teacher education programs. The same gaps can be found in the educational programs for pedagogues and school psychologists, despite the fact that work with foreign pupils has been included in their duties.

The supplementation of these programs with the issues connected to migration, intercultural education and the methods of working with culturally diverse classes is presently an important educational priority, the implementation of which cannot be ceded as non-obligatory. The varying quality of the educational programs present in the pedagogical university programs or the courses and training programs organised by various bodies are usually quite different from those in the formal educational institutions for teachers. It is urgent and necessary to undertake appropriate program reforms.

It is also important and necessary to develop a strategy for carrying out systematic activities aiming to monitor the functioning of foreign pupils in schools,
continuously providing them with various forms of support, as well as aiding them in the many levels of inclusion in school community life. It is reasonable to suggest the establishment of the institution of educational coordinator for the collection of more detailed information on the pupils, their families and the scope and form of assistance provided to them by various institutions of the host society (Gmaj, Iglicka, & Walczak, 2013). It is especially urgent to develop a strategy for closer cooperation with parents and to increase their participation in school life.

References


