



**Report from the realization
of the initiative "In her own words"
mentoring program for intercultural assistants.**

AUGUST 2023



 TEACH FOR
POLAND



IN HER OWN WORDS


**Report on the Teach for Poland Foundation's
experience supporting cross-cultural assistants.**

Author (cover photo): **Olga Bochkar**,
educator, mediator, teacher of Polish as a foreign language, project coordinator
for support of Ukrainian educators at Teach for Poland Foundation.



Warsaw, I-VI.2023.

WWW.TEACHFORPOLAND.ORG



"It turns out that my work is important, that there are people who know how much we do for migrant children and families, for the school and teachers."

INTRODUCTION

After February 24, 2022, Poland grappled with an unprecedented influx of 4 million refugees, a challenge neither the public infrastructure nor the education system was ready to handle.

According to data from SIO, by September 30, 2022, out of a total 4,099,060¹ students attending Polish schools, 352,927 were children of non-Polish origin¹. By February 14, 2023, the largest contingent among them were the children and adolescents from Ukraine, totaling 187,900³.

This surge, while appearing numerically modest, carries significant implications. It could influence the education experience of native Polish children and potentially raise future unemployment rates. Yet the influx of students could also offer unforeseen benefits. For instance, after 2015, Turkey's acceptance of Syrian refugee students positively influenced the performance of domestic students, leading to an overall rise in academic achievement⁴.

What does the failure to care for 187,000 children from Ukraine mean in real terms, and what might the consequences be?



"Thank you for the opportunity to get to know the people who Inspire. It was highly motivating."

Having developed an understanding of the situation, the Teach for Poland Foundation launched a six-month program to support intercultural assistants in addressing the educational needs of refugee children.

¹ <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/199,dane-statystyczne-uczniow-wedug-klas>

² https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/1426,liczba-uczniow-cudzoziemcow-wedug-gmin/resource/45537/table?page=1&per_page=20&q=&sort=

³ <https://www.prawo.pl/oswiata/ukrainskie-dzieci-w-polskich-szkolach,520015.html>

⁴ https://transatlanticforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/O3/TLFL-Raport-o-integracji-dzieci-z-Ukariny_web.pdf



PN - 08:30 - 15:30
PRASZA M

HERBATA
Dziś/ jutro
w. herbata

PROXIM

WHO IS AN INTERCULTURAL ASSISTANT?

A non-existent position in the classification of professions, although according to Article 165 of the Education Law, a foreign child is entitled to the assistance of a support person at school for a period of 12 months.

This support person's role is multifaceted: they act as a bridge between the teacher, child, and parent and work to integrate the child into the class. While placing children in Polish classrooms is effective due to proximity to the language, it leans more towards assimilation than true integration.

Therefore, another vital responsibility of the assistant is nurturing the child's sense of identity. It's crucial to preserve and celebrate the traditions and culture of the child's home country, especially for younger children.

In the program, we focused on more than improving the substantive knowledge of assistants. We provided them individualized support, underscoring the significance of their mission, fostering a safe community and strengthening relationships.

**Legal aspects
in school work**

listen





13
000
000
QR CODE
13

9 assistants from 7 Warsaw schools took part in the 6-month program.

PROGRAM

During this time we provided:



4 webinars

open to anyone interested in the subject



2 on-site meetings with experts*



56 mentoring meetings

(6 with each assistant)



the support of a psychologist



an integration trip to Lublin



a stationary wellness workshop



support to 460 students, with the program's participants actively working to ensure that the system did not assimilate, but integrated the children into the new society, preserving their cultural identity and emphasizing mental well-being over grades.

* The meetings were broadcasted and could be watched by outsiders, such as assistants who were not were in our program.

The rest of this report is based on observations of the group and direct communication with the assistants. To respect the privacy of the program's female participants, their statements are kept anonymous.



LANGUAGE BARRIER

"I am a psychologist, and the fact that I can only say basic things in Polish limits me a lot and deepens my self-doubt. At work I can't, as I used to, express everything the child needs or what problems the child is facing to the teachers, because this is specialized and abstract lexis (...) Our children can't talk about themselves in a language that Polish children understand, they can't tell their story, so they don't relate to each other.

At some point, some children just go silent."

Naming emotions and mental states can sometimes be difficult even in the native language. With Polish as a foreign language, the ability to express these things linguistically appears at the upper-intermediate B1 level. It's perplexing when schools **compel intercultural assistants to converse with children in Polish instead of their native language**. Remember, speaking in their native language offers children psychological security, essential for effective learning.

"The staff coordinator called me in and told me that today I was on toilet duty, which meant ensuring the trash bins weren't overflowing and the toilet seats were clean.

I expressed my discomfort, asking if I was expected to clean the restrooms between lessons while wearing a dress.

She responded dismissively,
"How does your dress limit you?"

INTRODUCING THE ASSISTANTS TO THE TEACHING STAFF

Why is the assistant at the school? While many students recognize and seek out the assistant's help, other issues arise like: **"The teacher won't let me into the class, insisting he can manage without me. How should I handle this?" or "I wasn't scheduled for the teacher's lesson today."**

This year, the assistants were employed by the 3rd sector, and had an unspecified role. This uncertainty affected how the rest of the teaching staff viewed their position and value.

Diminishing an assistant's role to merely a translator or maintenance worker severely impacts their motivation. We must understand that students are observant; they notice the dynamics within the teaching community and can often exploit them.

The cornerstone of our program's success lies in fostering a sense of community among participants and acknowledging the value of their contributions.

**The role of the
intercultural
assistant**

listen





LACK OF SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS AND DUTIES

Is academic performance in particular subjects the responsibility of the assistant or the subject teacher?

"The Vice Principal confronted me in the corridor, blaming me for two boys receiving failing grades at the year's end. She said I should have tutored them in multiple subjects. While I did my best, especially in my major, Biology, I struggled to help them with Physics and Geography. I feel terrible."

Working with parents who have migration experience presents unique challenges. Their understanding and expectations differ considerably from those parents who are well-acquainted with the Polish education system, have graduated from it, and understand its traditions and social norms. While most parents expect dedication and results from teachers, those with a migrant background often rely heavily on intercultural assistants. For many, this assistant might be **the only person at school who speaks their language.** Assistants are perceived as a trusted resource they believe understands their unique concerns, who **"surely knows everything."**

**"I have two boys in 7th grade.
They don't want to learn Polish
because they are afraid that if they
do, they will stay here forever.
And they don't want that."**

FEAR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF FORCED MIGRATION

A child's mindset and ability to see opportunities can be overshadowed when there's uncertainty at home, especially when parents feel unstable and talk about returning to their homeland.

Continuity in education is crucial. Interruptions make catching up more challenging and increase the risk of school dropout. Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school compared to their peers. Notably, after the first semester, many of our program participants observed a significant number of student dropouts. These children now exist outside of any formal educational system. One assistant noted, **"Several students left after struggling with the curriculum. To my knowledge, they now attend neither Polish nor Ukrainian schools."**

"We had a student with autism. Unsure of the most effective methods for him, I constantly consulted our psychologist. The boy's mother insisted, 'My child is healthy; you just need to find the right approach.' Eventually, we succeeded."



TRAUMA

For the caregiver, visiting a psychologist is a taboo subject.

"We noticed the boy wasn't developing appropriately and suggested he needed professional observation, but his grandmother was resistant. Eventually, I convinced her to take her grandson to a psychologist. I located an expert, arranged their appointment, and now he is under observation. You can see that the child is beginning to adjust in class and bond with his peers."

The assistants, too, require support. Most came here alone due to the war, juggling personal responsibilities and their children's needs. While they work, learn Polish, pursue additional classes and further their education, they find no time for themselves.

**Working with a child
with trauma**

listen





"The kids don't need my help with the test anymore, but they ask me to come just to sit. My presence makes them feel safe, that they can count on me, but they do all the tasks on their own."

A SENSE OF SECURITY

"The educator noticed a child repeatedly wearing the same outfit and recommended contacting her parents. The girl was also frequently absent. Upon inquiry, I discovered she was enrolled in a Ukrainian school remotely while attending the Polish school for integration, as her mother wished."

Speaking in their native language allows the assistant to better discern the children's concerns. "One student was particularly anxious because her mother was expecting and she feared her mother would die in childbirth. After many discussions, she now proudly talks about her younger brother. Another student is grappling with the pain of her parents' impending divorce."

War destroys families. The trauma of migration and separation are further compounded by life challenges like divorce, betrayal, disability, or the tragic loss of loved ones.

"Imagine a teacher declaring in the hallway, 'I puke on those Ukrainians' and then complaining that children are reluctant to attend her lessons."

HATE SPEECH

Sometimes ordinary conflicts have the hallmarks of exclusion.

"There is a child in class, the only Ukrainian, who reacts to stress with aggression. After a minor altercation where he pushed another student, the Polish teachers automatically sided with the Polish student. I stepped in, advocating for the Ukrainian boy, seeking to understand the root of the issue, and conversed with him extensively. Over time, he settled in and even made friends."

Children often use nationality as leverage in conflicts. **But beware: their words often echo sentiments from home.**

"In the 6th grade, one boy consistently bullies a girl. Despite our attempts to intervene, it seems the real issue might be what's being said at home. His comment, 'you don't deserve free lunches,' feels like a regurgitation of adult sentiments. The girl's distressed mother is considering moving her to a different class or, if needed, another school."



Cross-cultural assistants came with their own experience of war and may have their own traumas and difficult experiences, which the teaching staff should be sensitive to:



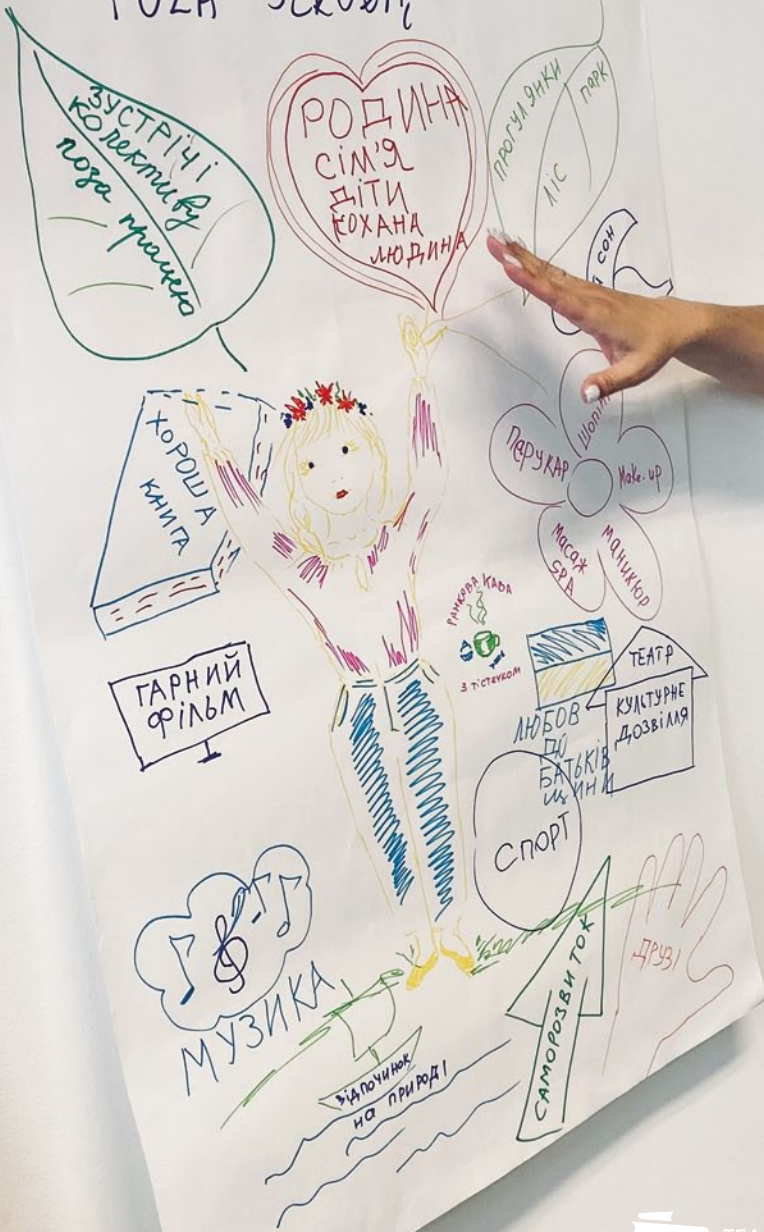
"The challenge for me was to be an assistant to Russian children. I came from a region of Ukraine that has been at war since 2014. I understand that the child is not to blame, but from another perspective, maybe her father is killing our children back home. The challenge was to accept and see the child, not her nationality."

**Polish and Ukrainian
education system**

listen



ПОЗА ШКОЛА



TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

The lack of job stability and uncertainty about employment from one month to the next, greatly demotivated assistants. **Some assistants even left their positions within a month, leaving the children they had bonded with feeling abandoned.**

MOBILITY OF FAMILIES

This is tantamount to children frequently changing schools. Some families return to their home country to care for aging relatives. These shifts are unpredictable and unavoidable. Additionally, **there are concerns about the influx of new students in the event of a nuclear power plant explosion, urban infrastructure collapse, or heightened conflict in the country's west.**

BEST PRACTICES

for intercultural assistants, school principals, teachers,
school psychologists, educators, and parents.
Their goal is to show how we can build an inclusive
and empathetic school befitting the XXI Century.

→ **POSITIVE FRAMING**

"I always tell children that they are great, that everything will work out. I constantly remind children of their potential, assuring them that they'll succeed- and in the end, they believe it. Instead of highlighting challenges, I encourage them to see every situation as an exciting adventure, filled with new friendships and opportunities."

→ **WELCOMING PARENTS**

At one school, assistants crafted a guide to familiarize parents with the Polish educational system. The guide covered everything from grading, how the electronic diary works, yearly schedules, and school rules. It's also helpful to include contacts for local foundations that work with children in their city or district.

→ **CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

"In my daughter's class, the parents arranged a workshop. When asked to share about Ukraine, I created a presentation that incorporated Ukrainian language lessons. The enthusiasm of the Polish students was heartwarming! I've since conducted similar lessons at my school."

→ **BUILDING TRUST IN THE CLASSROOM**

"A misunderstanding arose in the 7th grade: Polish students believed I was secretly helping Ukrainian students on their assignments. Through consistent class discussions and a math quest, the Ukrainian students demonstrated their skills and independent capabilities, while Polish students developed a sense of trust towards their new classmates."

→ **INTEGRATION**

Jointly looking for something in the child besides the foreign student. "I didn't like the fact that they don't engage children creatively at school. I went around, asking the children what they enjoyed in their school in Ukraine and what they wanted to do now. Those who liked to sing are now in the school choir. Girls who danced are now involved in school performances. I believe they will become an example for others."

→ **SOCIAL PARTICIPATION**

"One of my proudest moments was ensuring an anxious student attended the eighth-grade ball. Through continuous encouragement and by connecting her with supportive peers, it was heartwarming to hear she was eagerly selecting her prom dress!"

My colleagues won a grant for a trip to the forest for their pupils. At the campfire they prepared treats, collected herbs for tea, sang and danced folk dances, and played movement games.

→ **SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES**

Events like "Embroidery Day", where students crafted and explained the significance of both Polish and Ukrainian embroidery patterns, have been impactful. Other events highlighted cultural ties between Poland and Ukraine, from celebrating Taras Shevchenko Day and exploring the friendship of Mickiewicz with Ukraine, to drawing parallels between poets Lina Kostenko and Wislawa Szymborska, encapsulated through poetry readings and thematic collages.

Schools offered lessons in Ukrainian, Georgian, and other languages. Culinary workshops showcased dishes from various nationalities, while other school activities like poem recitations, talent shows, art sessions, math quizzes, and field trips helped school feel like a community.

"One girl, weighed down by the news of her father's disappearance at the front, remained withdrawn and walked around depressed all the time. However, after persuading her to participate in a recitation contest, her demeanor changed; I witnessed her smile for the first time. It was a break from her grief. From then on, she began to make friends with other students."

For many migrant children, school is their primary interaction outside home. Joint activities foster integration. "We'd often discuss weekend plans with the students, offering much-needed conversation about ways to enjoy time in Warsaw with their families."

MORE THAN TRANSLATION

Assistants offer more than just linguistic help; they provide emotional and motivational support tailored to each student's unique challenges. "I recall one 7th-grade girl who struggled with motivation. Through persistent encouragement, she successfully navigated her academic year." Another poignant instance involved a boy who, despite the rising temperatures, insisted on wearing long-sleeved shirts. "Upon delving deeper, I discovered he was self-consciousness about his weight. After heartfelt conversations and coordinating with his mother, I was gladdened to see him confidently embrace the summer, wearing shorts and short-sleeved shirts." Student motivation and comfort is a prerequisite for learning.

**RECOMMENDATIONS,
to be able to properly
plan the work of an
intercultural assistant**

1 Introduce the assistant to the teaching staff: the teacher, educator, psychologist.

2 Establish relationships, support parents of migrant children during the school year, conduct parent meetings.

3 Provide an engaging space of support and acceptance for migrant students and the entire school community.

4 Educate the school community about diversity, empathy, openness and acceptance of all cultures.

5 Develop a sense of belonging and encourage students with migration experience to become involved in school life.

6 Engage children with migration experience in the school's cultural events and undertakings.

7 Undertake integration initiatives for all students.

8 Promote the presence of an assistant in lessons as support for teachers.

9 Ensure the translation of necessary educational, informational materials into Ukrainian.



INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

As another academic year dawns, we grapple with a pressing question: Is there still a role for intercultural assistants in our schools - individuals who can connect through a shared language, offer a listening ear, and provide a semblance of the homes many have left behind?

Polish schools will inevitably open their doors to students and parents with challenging migratory experiences, yet brimming with the resilience to thrive, overcome obstacles, and make the most out of life. These children stand to enrich our society with their optimism, talents, knowledge, and values. **We must ensure they aren't left to navigate this journey alone.**

The Teach for Poland Foundation is considering the launch of a second edition of a program aimed at bolstering Ukrainian intercultural assistants and educators, specifically to assist children with migratory or traumatic experiences.

Should you be interested in contributing to its development and implementation, I welcome you to reach out:



Katarzyna Nabrdalik

CEO Teach for Poland

katarzyna.nabrdalik@teachforpoland.org



**Doctor of Child Psychology, Psychologist,
and Correctional Pedagogue**

Roksana worked with about 40 children from Ukraine and Belarus.

It pains me every time I hear the term "a child with a migration experience." Behind those words lie countless heart-wrenching stories that leave me with pangs of sadness. These children taught me the true meaning of patience. Some, especially those with heightened sensitivity, grapple profoundly with their traumatic pasts, requiring immense dedication to support them. Yet many, despite all challenges, have managed to adapt and find joy. My gratitude extends to the entire school community – its leadership and teachers – for their unwavering support and tireless efforts.

Roksolana



**Former Senior Lecturer at the National Metallurgical Academy
of Ukraine and English teacher**

**In Yevhenia's Polish school, 4th to 7th grade, there were
25 students from Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia.**

I very much understand what happens in the head of a child
with the experience of migration. We experience it together.

The most important thing is support!

These students taught me courage - to stand up for myself in any
situation. They even motivated me to start talking in Polish.

When Kamil, a Polish student, complimented my proficiency,
I felt a surge of pride.

Yevhenia



**Elementary School Teacher and Deputy School Director
Svitlana worked with 53 students from Ukraine and Belarus.**

To me, success is when a child remains calm and content, even if they receive a low grade or face setbacks. It's inspiring when they confidently say, "It's okay, I'll make it right in August." Every child has unique strengths; there are no "lesser students." It's essential to constantly uplift children with positive reinforcement; doing so ensures their well-being and growth.

Svitlana



Geography Teacher with 11 years experience
**Valeria worked with 52 students from Ukraine,
Belarus and Georgia.**

I felt joy when students initially approached me for Geography help, only to discover I also had knowledge in Physics and Biology.

It's deeply rewarding that I could assist them in these areas. Had I not been in a school setting upon arriving in Poland, I can't fathom how I might have adapted. These children have instilled in me the bravery to chase my dreams.

Valeria



**Former Art Teacher (Choreography) of 15 years
in Zaporozhye, Ukraine**

**In Poland, Viktoria worked with about 60 children
(3rd-8th grade) from Ukraine and Belarus
(some students had special needs).**

I feel proud every morning when the children run to me and share their stories and experiences. The children have taught me to look at the world through rose-colored glasses- a welcome reprieve from the daily news.

Happiness is in the little things.

Viktoria



Biologist and former Russian as a Foreign Language Teacher

Natalie worked with about 30 children in Poland: a boy from Iran, a girl from Georgia, and children from Belarus, Uzbekistan and Ukraine.

I really liked how we set goals with the students and I could see the transformation. The children taught me to enjoy life and to let go of situations quickly.

Natalia



TEACH FOR POLAND