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"THIS IS MY PRIVATE WAR WITH PUTIN": WORKING WITH REFUGEE STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE*

Introduction: Culturally homogenous Poland changed from 24 February 2022 due to high numbers of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion.

Research Aim: The aim of the study was to explore Polish school teachers' lived experiences of teaching Ukrainian refugee students.

Research Method: Having applied an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, we conducted nine focus groups with a sample of fifty-two teachers.

Results: Two superordinate themes, Rewards and Challenges, were identified during the analytical process. The findings give voice to teachers' perspectives on the issues impacting them. The findings shed light on student and teacher needs and the interactions between teachers, students and the host school environment which helped build understanding between the two communities.

Conclusions: The findings can inform teacher education and practice, policy and services that enhance the experiences of both teachers and their students.

Keywords: teachers, lived experience, school climate, interculturality, refugee students

INTRODUCTION

Refugees are forced to leave their homes, often within a short timeframe, have little choice of destination, and can rarely return to their home countries safely. They can lack a sense of belonging in the host country, are without citizenship, nationality, or a home (Mosselson, 2006). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused an exodus of refugees to neighbouring countries. Over four million people crossed into Poland within a few months (UNHCR, in Teke Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022). By April 2022, about 1.5 million displaced people had stayed in Poland (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). Most were women, children and the elderly (Maternik et al., 2023). The support provided to Ukrainians in Poland was mainly provided by ordinary citizens and non-governmental organizations (Ociepa-Kicińska and Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodan, 2022). Refugees were housed in private homes (Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2022) and the majority of Poles held positive attitudes towards the state accepting Ukrainian war refugees (CBOS, in Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2022). While positive attitudes are often missing towards refugees from other countries, the political and legal situation in the Ukraine and the aggressor was clearly defined for Poles (Åslund, 2022). Research into teachers' lived experiences with refugee students is limited and the invasion of Ukraine offered a unique opportunity to deepen this knowledge.

In 2000, there were only several thousand foreign students in Polish schools. (Markowska-Manista, 2016). The 2022/23 school year started with approximately 190,000 children from Ukraine, a significant number of whom were war refugees (Ambroziak, in Szaban, 2022). In Poland, every child under the age of eighteen, regardless of citizenship or legal status of residence, has the constitutional right to free education (Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2022). There are two types of schools in Poland, mainstream and integrative. In integrative schools, the number of students with disabilities is limited to between three and five with a maximum of twenty students per class with access to co-teaching while there should be a maximum of two students with disabilities in mainstream classes (Ćwirynkało et al., 2017). The majority of refugee students are in mainstream education and can be admitted to schools throughout the school year. Over time, detailed regulations for refugee students were developed that included additional Polish language classes (2001), employing an assistant for a student who does not have sufficient language competencies (2010), classes for the language and culture of the country of origin (2015), and the provision of psychological and pedagogical support (2017) (Gmaj, 2021; Szaban,

2022). This article presents qualitative research on teachers' lived experiences with Ukrainian students in Poland.

Children carry the double burden of the refugee experience and the challenges of resettlement (Biasutti et al., 2020; Thomas, 2016) including new language, loss of friends and community and, for some children, separation from family members (Borkowska, 2016; Lisowska and Łojko, 2022; Mosselson, 2006). Children who have experienced loss and trauma adapt differently to adults (Biasutti et al., 2020). They may experience poverty, stereotyping and discrimination (Block et al., 2014; Mayor, 2021; Ziaian et al., 2018) which alongside trauma can result in behavioural and mental health concerns which can manifest in the classroom (Duren and Yalçın, 2021; Fazel and Stein, 2003; Hadfield et al., 2017; Montgomery, 2010; Quosh et al., 2013; Smith Fawzi et al., 2009; Walker and Zuberi, 2020).

Including refugee children in education and the school community implements fundamental human and child rights (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018), and supports their adaptation and development (Biasutti et al., 2020; Block et al., 2014; Horswood et al., 2019; McDiarmid et al., 2022; Terhart and von Dewitz, 2018). Creating optimal conditions at school enhances psychosocial and physical functioning, supports well-being, life satisfaction and strengthens self-efficacy and self-esteem, constructive social behaviour, and a commitment to learning, achievements and aspirations (Arnot et al., 2009; Makarova et al., 2019; Warriner et al., 2020). Teachers play a significant role in supporting the psychological wellbeing of refugee students and their socio-cultural adaptation in school environments that are often under-resourced (Nagasa, 2014; McDiarmid et al., 2022).

Teachers' perception of refugee students can be dominated by students' adaptive problems, behavioural difficulties and perceived "fragility" (Gudovitch et al., 2021; Serin and Bozdag, 2020). Less often do perceptions recognise the potential of refugee children or their needs that are similar to their peers (Asghari, 2022; Serin and Bozdag, 2020). Reported negative perceptions of refugee students may also stem from cultural differences that affect their behaviour that differs to the norms in their new country (Brookie, 2018; Gudovitch et al., 2021). In pedagogical practice, a focus on deficits is likely to result in poorer experiences for students and teachers (McDiarmid et al., 2022). Finding a balance between negative experiences and existing strengths is required.

Teachers working with refugee students rarely receive formal support and preparation (Chamorro et al., 2021; Croce, 2018; Gözpinar, 2019; Levi, 2019; Mac-Nevin, 2011; Taş and Baki Minaz, 2021), which generates a sense of helplessness and stress, especially when managing the negative effects of trauma exhibited in classrooms (Mayor, 2021). They can feel abandoned when faced with a lack of systemic support to meet students' individual needs (LeRoy and Boomgard, 2021). In countries where migration policy is inconsistent with socio-educational policy, they experience contradictions and moral dilemmas (Svensson, 2019). The lack of

coordination and insufficient information for teachers is problematic and beyond the competence of individual teachers and the quality of schools especially when teachers lack data on students' backgrounds, cultures, and needs (Whiteman, 2005). Consequently, they feel incompetent to manage students with specific needs related to refugee experiences (Taş and Baki Minaz, 2021).

Teachers have signaled the need to acquire knowledge and attend professional development in the workplace (Baldwin, 2015). Informal learning from personal experiences can also provide opportunities for teachers to modify their teaching practices (Prentice and Ott, 2021). Information from colleagues with specific competencies is known to be helpful (Prentice and Ott, 2021). Cooperation between teachers and other social, medical, psychological and pedagogical professionals as well as parents or guardians is crucial (Gudovitch et al., 2021; Reinking, 2019; Thomas, 2016).

The diversity of refugee students' needs, resulting from cultural differences and traumatic experiences, necessitates teacher capacities to deal with unpredictable situations, and to individualise teaching methods (Baldwin, 2015). Working in a culturally diverse educational environment especially one characterised by displacement, trauma and loss (Johnson et al., 2017) requires a range of pedagogical skills such as the ability to reflect on one's own experiences and openness to developing new skills (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2021). These factors can add to the stress and reluctance to work with refugee students and place a significant burden on teachers (Pacek, 2022). Teachers report the essential role of individualised relationships with refugee students (Barret and Berger, 2021), showing empathy, a focus on students' resources (Harris Garad, 2021) and acknowledging emotions in relationships with students who share difficult and traumatic experiences with them (Mayor, 2021). Support in these areas allows them to offer better help to the student and to deal personally with their own feelings and emotions that arise in response to students' narratives (Atalay et al., 2022; Barret and Berger, 2021; Croce, 2018).

Notably, there is also scarce literature that refers to positive aspects of experiences of teachers working with refugee students. The literature that does focus on positive aspects acknowledges emotions and recognizes students' potential (Asghari, 2022). A positive approach shows teachers openness to students' needs and adaptation process is important for refugee students' inclusion. Research on teachers experiences in Poland highlighted how their needs for support and preparation to work with foreign students are not met. Although schools gradually created a range of professional development activities, they are not obligatory (Kościółek, 2020). Teachers' narratives were dominated by communication difficulties, challenges related to psychological issues such as managing post-traumatic stress, lack of motivation to learn, social barriers such as negative attitudes of some Polish parents, and professional constraints includ-

ing teachers being unfamiliar working with a diverse group (Kościółek, 2020; Król and Kubin, 2010; Markowska-Manista, 2016, 2019; Markowska-Manista and Januszewska, 2015; Młynarczuk-Sokołowska and Szostak-Król, 2016; Nazaruk and Tokarewicz, 2017; Zapolska et al., 2019). A shortage of resources mainly textbooks, limited access to psychological and pedagogical assistance and working with parents due to language barriers and identifying students' needs using culturally inappropriate tools were identified (Tędziagolska et al., 2022; Fundacja…, 2022). Teachers declared a need to create a safe emotional environment for students. These problems have become particularly acute in the face of the war in Ukraine.

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the current research was to understand the day-to-day lived experience or "being in the world" of teachers of Ukrainian refugee students.

RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

An interpretive phenomenological framework was used (Parahoo, 2014; Smith and Osborne, 2003). Such an approach focuses on how meanings are transformed and generated to make sense of these experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). A focus group method was employed to collect data (Barbour, 2018; Parker and Tritter, 2006). Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009) argued that there is methodological compatibility in combining a focus group method with interpretive phenomenology whereby a focus group is treated as a group interview. This approach brings certain advantages through the stimulation of interactive discussion between participants. Notes were taken and recordings of focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) followed four steps: (1) multiple readings and making notes; (2) transforming notes into emergent themes; (3) seeking relationships and clustering themes, and (4) writing an IPA report (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, pp. 366–368). Full ethical approval was granted from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland [9/2022].

Sampling was purposive (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p. 364). An invitation letter was sent to the principals of ten schools in north-eastern Poland known to have refugee students from Ukraine. Seven principals of the ten schools approached agreed to distribute research information. Of the fifty-two teachers who participated, forty-five were women aged between twenty-five and sixty-one years. Teaching experience ranged between one and thirty-eight years. Forty-three worked in mainstream schools and nine in integrative schools. Twenty-five partic-

ipants worked with students between ten and fourteen years of age, twenty with students between fifteen and nineteen years of age, and seven with students between seven and nine years of age. Forty-eight teachers worked in urban areas and four – in rural settings. Each teacher had a Masters' degree and nine had completed a university course in special education.

RESULTS

Two superordinate themes, Rewards and Challenges, and their sub-categories reported in this article were identified during the analytical process.

Challenges

There was notable emphasis on challenges during focus group discussions. These challenges were classified into three distinct sub-categories: (1) challenges associated with students, (2) challenges associated with teachers, and (3) challenges associated with external factors related to the education system, formal supports and procedures.

A commonly recurring issue related to students' diverse needs. Students were described as diverse in relation to personalities, reactions, (special) needs, emotions, skills, previously acquired knowledge, and experiences. Describing students' reactions to the new school environment, one teacher reported:

> In some children you could see such euphoria, because they saw something new, in others there was a lot of withdrawal, still others reacted with tears. I would say they were afraid. And all of them didn't know how long they would stay here. Such an uncertainty, you know. (F1, 3)

Another participant, referring to teacher creativity to address challenges added:

> You've got a point there. It was the very first barrier. There wasn't just one way to make them feel better. (F1, 4)

Diversity also related to student skills, academic achievements, and special educational needs. Although teachers expressed empathy, these differences were experienced as an additional burden and frustration for some teachers, deflecting responsibility. One English teacher explained:

> I have many students in classes. Some of them speak English fluently and have no problems with the subject. But there are others who don't speak English and Polish at all and I really don't have time to focus on them or prepare some adjusted worksheets just for them. I don't speak Ukrainian or Russian and they should be responsible for

learning, not me, and some of them don't even attend after-school classes to learn Polish that the school organised!. (F8, 4)

Other participants, however, expressed their readiness to be flexible, learn, and try to find the best methods to communicate with students and teach them:

There's one girl who attends the sixth grade. […] When I communicated with her, I spoke a little bit in Russian, a bit in Polish, children in English, it was just one big mishmash [laughs]. It's been a while like this... But recently I was supposed to explain something to her and I talked to her and looked for some words in Russian, and she looked at me and said, "Maybe we can try in Polish?" They learn quickly. (F2, 1)

Another said:

Well, maybe not everyone, but we can always use Google translators [laughs]. (F2, 3)

There was a sensitive issue that related to communication barriers and the Russian invasion. Some teachers reported that some Ukrainian students refused to speak Russian although they knew the language.

There are two schoolgirls in my class who come from the western part of Ukraine. I noticed that they were angry when their Ukrainian schoolmates spoke Russian. You need to be sensitive here. (F4, 3)

And:

I think it really depends… I didn't notice it. For some of them Russian is their mother tongue. It's impossible just to give it up because of the war. I guess my students were happy when I tried to talk to them in Russian. (F4, 2)

Participants also prioritised student need and questioned the relevance of the curriculum: *We realised that what they need most is support.*

It's quickly became obvious that there's no point in requiring content knowledge in, to give an example, the history of Poland. They needed support, not knowledge. (F4, 5)

The second sub-category of challenges related to teachers themselves – work overload, teachers' competencies, and lack of preparation to teach refugee students as well as the emotions they experienced. As one of them explained,

It's terrible. This is a huge burden. There is so much uncertainty. No one knows how long these students will be in our school or whether next year there will be preparatory classes as well… I don't know what to do to make it right. We choose everything

ourselves. And in fact, you don't know whether you're doing it right or wrong… We're tired and exhausted and we hear is that we should do this or that… The government could think what to do to help us as well – for a change. (F5, 7)

One teacher, when asked whether they felt prepared to teach refugee students, replied:

Definitely not prepared. Because we were thrown in the deep end. The whole situation was very stressful. Some of us were afraid but we were quickly forced to pull ourselves together and face problems we had no idea about. We hadn't taught immigrant or refugee children before… (F7, 2)

Many teachers also reported dealing with their own intense emotions in response to students' language challenges. One teacher who was also an examiner described a situation that she and her colleague found hard to bear:

I had a very difficult moment here... [The student] was very nice, motivated, eager to learn. Ukrainian children didn't have to take the school-leaving exams with Polish students, but she learnt so hard and decided to take it. She was so excited here when she came with her friends. But she was in Poland for just two months… She didn't understand everything. She was taking the exam in a separate room – just her and two teachers. And she had instructions in Ukrainian, but the main text was in Polish, very difficult Polish… And I was reading this to her slowly but there was a barrier… She didn't understand many words, stopped smiling and started weeping… We [another examiner and I] just couldn't make it and we cried with her. We couldn't even help her because we didn't understand the instructions [wipes away her tears]. (F1, 2)

Other participants shared that teachers were required support to deal with their own emotions:

Somehow, I didn't have such a breakdown, to be honest, but when you spend so much time with these people [refugee students], someone should take care of those who take care of them, too. Because if you spend your time in such a pessimistic company, sometimes tears come to your eyes, and it is hard to come to them with a smile on your face every day. These are not so much my observations. You can talk to our speech therapists and a translator. She helped these Ukrainians and shared such a moving post. She said how hard it was sometimes for her to pick herself up, go home and behave normally with her children. That's because we see how much these children have been through. And she was exhausted, very tired of it. Of this helping. She needed this support, some coaching maybe. She supported others, but she also needed that support for herself. (F5, 7)

The last sub-category of challenges was associated with external factors related to the education system such as the different curriculum, lack of formal support,

and lack of interpreters. Participants also named unclear procedures and a lack of a cohesive approach. As one said:

> There is an organisational mess. From time to time some information from the Ministry will come in, but it is not full information. (F2, 1)

And another joined the discussion:

> You're right. The rules are very vague now. Sometimes they say yes, sometimes no. Everything's uncertain. (F2, 4)

Some teachers reported problems related to allocating students to classes:

> They can study in different forms, but their choice is not always good for them. For example, in one preparatory class we have children whose ages vary from 7 to 11. And sometimes they don't want to integrate with Polish students. It would be better for some of them to be in regular classes. (F6, 3)

And:

> The problem is that our systems of education are very different. It is difficult to choose the right school or grade. It's the principal's decision, but sometimes it turns up wrong. They usually try to convince parents that the best option for their children would be to attend a lower-level grade. And then we have in one class students who are thirteen and fifteen. There's no wonder that they sometimes don't like it and would rather go to class with their peers. (F6, 6)

Followed by:

> That's right. We also have students who learned in Ukraine in some sort of vocational school and then came to our comprehensive high school. It's a problem, too. They would rather continue the same courses and comprehensive subjects can be difficult. (F6, 2)

Participants complained that they felt unsupported and left to deal with all the problems themselves:

> There's no support at all. Nothing. We go with our problems to the principal, but we are left alone with it. I tell her [the principal] that I have no aids to communicate with parents, and she tells me, "How come? Use German, English, Russian… Find some way". You have to do it and that's it… This is really difficult, technically… (F3, 3)

Commonly, support was confined to cooperation between teachers within the school. Several teachers reported that they had not been trained to teach Polish

as a foreign language and such a new task was an unexpected challenge and they needed to become creative in looking for support with some success:

> When I found out that I was going to teach Polish to Ukrainian children, I was looking for coursebooks, some worksheets. And the study of European law and the course began to appear for me, because when you are looking for something, you know, well, maybe sometimes we think that they hear what I say on the phone, when I talk to someone. And I got the course. Teaching Polish to children whose first language is Belarusian, Ukrainian or Russian. Well, I asked the director if he would pay for me, and of course he said that he didn't have money for various things, but there was money for training. Well, I finished this course. This is the support I received. (F2, 3)

Some teachers reported that they would like to see organisational changes, such as smaller numbers of students in classes with refugee students, higher flexibility in choosing the right class for refugee students depending on their changing needs, and clear procedures referring to the next school year. One participant stated:

> We don't need any trainings now. We helped each other and came up with many solutions on our own. I wouldn't say that we're experts, but we know quite a lot, e.g. how to teach a differentiated group. We're an integrative school after all. (F2, 4)

Rewards

Although many participants framed their experiences as challenges, it was found they also reframed challenges as bringing rewards such as changing school climates and their own sense of fulfilment.

Including refugee students led to certain school transformations. Teachers reported that in all schools, Polish students and teachers showed solidarity with Ukrainians by showing the Ukrainian flags, providing information about where students can access help, and using themes such as the Ukraine or peace in student activities. Teachers developed lessons that discussed national and religious holidays and Ukrainian culture, Door plates and school notices were in Polish and Ukrainian. One teacher reported:

> We want them to feel like home. It's just a totally different school when you take a look at it. We've always been trying to promote tolerance, but right now it's just more visible. And quite often these are students' ideas. When they found out that Ukrainian students would come to our school, they asked if they could prepare these doorplates in Ukrainian. (F2, 1)

Attitudes towards Ukrainian students became more positive and Ukrainian students developed a greater understanding of Polish students. The mixture of cultures and languages became the impetus for new ways of communicating

and broadening students' horizons and interest in new cultures. As one teacher described:

> One day we had a lesson on important national and religious holidays in Poland and Ukraine. We had such a big calendar and both Polish and Ukrainian students wrote some dates and names of holidays on sticky notes. An ordinary lesson but it was a pleasure to look at them – they were really interested in finding out about other cultures and happy to share their experiences. (F9, 1)

Only one participant reported conflict between a Polish schoolboy and a Ukrainian student:

> The other day some students came to me and told me that Adam [pseudonym] was teasing Nadia [pseudonym] and she was crying. It turned out that there was a conflict between them. Nadia once said that she didn't want to do some exercises in a PE lesson. He told her that she had to do everything that Polish students do as well, and Nadia answered that she was sick of Poland. Then the conflict was getting bigger, he called her names, and generally was very rude. I talked to both of them. First, I told Adam about the consequences of discriminating against people based on their nationality. Then the three of us talked together. It was a long conversation. It turned out both of them had a difficult history and different traumatic experiences. Long story short, they became friends. (F8, 7)

Other teachers talked only about positive relationships between Ukrainian and Polish students. and how they improved after the war broke out. One participant recalled the following example:

> There's a Ukrainian girl in my class who's been living in Poland for four years now. She came to our school this year. And when I talked to her, she told me that before the war she had horrible experiences with her peers. She was afraid of going to school and meeting her schoolmates who bullied her… And it was because of her nationality, she said. After the outbreak of war everything changed. She might not be the most outgoing, sociable person at school, but I guess she feels safer and more confident. (F9, 2)

Teachers also felt satisfaction seeing how Ukrainian students overcome barriers becoming more open and confident, enjoying school, making friends, speaking Polish, and other achievements such as academic success. One teacher described the satisfaction she felt:

> In my class there is a boy who has adapted perfectly. He was the first refugee student, and all students welcomed him very enthusiastically! Everyone wanted to help! And he loves this class and wants to live here. He's so motivated and eager to learn. I'm really happy and proud of them all. (F3, 2)

Teachers' experiences were also associated with the rewards found in developing cooperation between teachers, parents, principals, and students. As one of them summarised:

> The war has united us all in a sense. There's a saying that nothing unites people as much as a common enemy, but it was something more. We all had a common goal – to help these refugees. Parents of my students called me and asked what they could do to help. When there was a class trip, they offered to pay for Ukrainian students, they collected money to help families, and came to school with new ideas about what we could do. In this horrible situation of war, it was something amazing, like a light in the tunnel. (F3, 1)

> And the cooperation between us also got better. Maybe because we all had to learn and supporting each other became a necessity. (F3, 5)

The final category of rewards referred to teachers' sense of humanity and purpose. They felt that they had been doing something worthwhile which they valued greatly. One participant, when asked what gave her the strength to teach refugee students, recalled her experiences:

> I am sorry, because I am maybe a bit too sensitive, but I think that this is our contribution to the war, because I believe that Ukrainians do not fight only for themselves, but also for us. I'm convinced of that. And my brother is a diplomat and lives in Kyiv, so my experiences and willingness to get involved and help are also intensified. Especially the first 10 days, when they were evacuated there, then, after some time, they came back, it's different now, right? I mean, I'm talking about my brother who came back… It was also a terrible experience for me, and the first ten days when the war broke out... I wanted to do as much as I could… In a way I feel that… This is my private war with Putin. (F1, 4)

DISCUSSION

Polish teachers who participated in this study made meaning of their lived experiences of teaching refugee students framing them as challenges and rewards. The conceptual framework of interpretive phenomenology and focus group interviews proved useful in responding to the study aims and understanding the experiences rooted in the mass exodus from Ukraine. The findings in this research support other studies conducted in the Polish context (Tędziagolska et al., 2022; Fundacja…, 2022). Focus groups did prove useful in stimulating discussion and sharing individual experiences. By building a better understanding of how teachers experience teaching refugee children, the findings provide evidence that supports the need for educational policy development and changes to service delivery.

This study is significant as it highlights policy and practice changes needed in Poland and adds to the body of knowledge globally. The movement of people away from conflicts, climate changes and disasters is a global problem that traumatises children and families, challenging teachers in host countries to meet children's complex educational needs usually within limited existing resources. The numerous challenges associated with diversity, acceptance and language barriers alongside teachers feeling unprepared for the impact of trauma and how to manage their own emotional responses. Many participants in this study had limited access to much needed support and training. This has also been found in research by McDiarmid et al. (2022). In their study, teachers reported an emotional burden in connection with the tasks they undertook, including those aimed at ensuring the wellbeing of refugee students. Similar conclusions were drawn by Häggström et al. (2020), who found that not all teachers working with immigrant and refugee children felt prepared to support students, often had to go beyond their duties, and found new situations caused a sense of guilt and increased stress. For students, uncertainty related to displacement, concern about the dangers that their relatives and friends in Ukraine faced, and the temporary nature of their stay in Poland or at school was stressful. Such uncertainty is widely discussed in other studies on the life situation of refugees (Tędziagolska et al., 2022).

Other challenges relating to systemic factors were the suitability of a curriculum geared towards Polish students and a lack of practical resources such as access to interpreters. Different levels of language proficiency, be it Polish, English or Russian, posed the greatest barriers. Although teachers showed readiness to address language needs, communication was difficult and burdensome. Refugee students rarely arrive with documented educational backgrounds which makes it more difficult for teachers to specify their requirements on arrival (Markowska-Manista and Dąbrowa, 2014; Thomas, 2016). Although legal regulations had been implemented, they are insufficient and inadequate to meeting the real needs of individual students. The findings confirmed insufficient preparation of teachers to work with refugee students, and the lack of systematic support in the process of carrying out educational tasks available in other Polish and international studies (Croce, 2018; Gözpinar, 2019; Levi, 2019; MacNevin, 2011; Młynarczuk-Sokołowska and Szostak-Król, 2016; Taş and Baki Minaz, 2021).

The rewards were an important aspect of meaning making for teachers. The positive impact that empathy and efforts to embrace diversity had on the school climate, students and teachers made efforts worthwhile. Another Polish study (Tędziagolska et al., 2022) found that teachers, students, parents, principals, and the administration worked together to address student need and support each other in this process. Similarity between the two cultures may have also played a role in changing school cultures. Discriminatory practices were not commonly noted by participants and may be different experiences for students from other coun-

tries and cultures. Other studies (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2003), conducted before the war, suggested that the level of acceptance of Polish students towards migrant students depended on their nationality and that geo-political factors may have a strong influence on national values and attitudes towards refugees.

Participants identified education as beneficial and stabilizing, therefore, their efforts were rewarding and had purpose creating a sense of security which focused on positive experiences in school and extracurricular activities. The meaning teachers made from these experiences supported their efforts and commitment to the work needed. Rewards moved beyond the satisfaction of fulfilling their professional role and meanings were associated with their inner world in which doing something worthwhile was considered important and countered the effort associated with challenging circumstances.

Four recommendations can be made from these findings.

1. Access to supportive counselling for educators in recognition of the emotional impact of the work.
2. The provision of teacher professional development that addresses the complexity of issues faced by refugee students including the impact of trauma and the rights of refugees.
3. Increased opportunities to work with other practitioners such as psychologists, social workers and disability specialists.
4. Ensure the inclusion of cross-cultural competencies, foreign language teaching, anti-discriminatory practices and equity and diversity in teacher education.

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the challenges teaching refugee students, the participants in this study found meaning and purpose in the rewards and changes that came about for students, the school environment and importantly for themselves and their teaching practices. The findings in this study highlighted gaps in the Polish education system leading to recommendations for change. The school environment plays a key role in teacher experience. While changes involving social values and attitudes took a positive turn in this study, changes in the state's educational policy requires intensive and long-term transformations according to international trends and policies.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted in one unique period of time during the invasion of a close neighbour which posed a serious threat to Europe. A longitudinal study

could give greater insights into teacher experience over time and the duration of the war. The longer children are unable to return to Ukraine, the more their circumstances and the impact on teacher experience are likely to change. The inclusion of individual interviews following the focus groups may also add to the depth of findings. Also, including Ukrainian students in future studies would be particularly beneficial.

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„TO MOJA PRYWATNA WOJNA Z PUTINEM": PRACA Z UCZNIAMI UCHODŹCZYMI Z UKRAINY

Wprowadzenie: Kulturowo homogeniczna Polska zmieniła swoje oblicze po 24 lutego 2022 roku z powodu ogromnej liczby ukraińskich uchodźców uciekających przed rosyjską inwazją.

Cel badań: W niniejszym artykule zastosowano interpretacyjną analizę fenomenologiczną w celu poznania doświadczeń polskich nauczycieli pracujących z uczniami uchodźczymi z Ukrainy.

Metoda badań: Grupę badaną stanowiło 52 nauczycieli, którzy uczestniczyli w 9 grupach fokusowych pomiędzy czerwcem a październikiem 2022 roku. Analiza pozwoliła na wyodrębnienie dwu tematów nadrzędnych: korzyści i wyzwań.

Wyniki: Wyniki pozwoliły na oddanie głosu nauczycielom w sprawach, które ich dotykają. Rzucają one światło na potrzeby uczniów i nauczycieli, a także interakcje pomiędzy nauczycielami i uczniami w środowisku szkolnym, które wspiera budowanie zrozumienia pomiędzy dwiema społecznościami: polską i ukraińską.

Wnioski: Wyniki posłużyć mogą ulepszeniu edukacji nauczycieli, praktyki pedagogicznej, a także polityki oświatowej i usług, co wpłynąć może na doświadczenia zarówno nauczycieli, jak i uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciele, doświadczenie, klimat szkoły, międzykulturowość, uczniowie uchodźczy