WIKTORIA MORITZ-LEŚNIAK, IZABELLA MAIN
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

MIGRANT PARENTS AT THE INTERSECTION OF VULNERABILITY AND THE DEMANDS OF POLAND'S EDUCATION SYSTEM*

"Vulnerability is created not by the individual's personal qualities but by the world they inhabit."

Vanessa Heaslip and Julie Ryden (2013)

INTRODUCTION

Although the multidisciplinary theoretical approach to vulnerability has rarely been applied in education studies, it holds the potential to broaden and challenge understandings of vulnerability and related concepts, such as mental health and wellbeing (Jopling, Zimmermann 2023). Vulnerability, traditionally defined as "an internal risk factor of the subject or a system that is exposed to a hazard and corresponds to its intrinsic tendency to be affected, or susceptible to damage," is often used in healthcare studies (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022, citing Paul 2013: 1). While vulnerability studies have largely overlooked migrant parents of

Correspondence addresses: wiktoria.moritz-lesniak@amu.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-
-4726-6597; izabella.main@amu.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-9881-6838

school-age children, there are a few notable exceptions: research on migrant parents' engagement with education in Norway (Schmid, Garrels 2021; Bergset 2017); their participation in parent–teacher meetings in Italy (Baraldi, Gavioli 2022); and both strategies to welcome migrant families in schools (Manzoni, Rolfe 2019) and the relationships between migrant parents and schools (Christie, Szorenyi 2015) in the United Kingdom. In this article, we examine the vulnerability of migrant parents facing the challenges of the Polish school system.

Parents today have numerous opportunities to broaden their skills. Both engaged parenthood and the related philosophy of attachment parenting are being practiced by growing numbers of parents; parenting is no longer a common-sense endeavor, and instead it requires preparation (Faircloth 2023). Parents, including migrant parents, face increased challenges due to their children being more vulnerable as a result of COVID-19 (Gromada, Richardson, Rees 2020), the escalation of the war in Ukraine (Hillis, Tucker, Baldonado 2024), and virtual socialization, global crises, and inflexible school systems (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2017). Parental involvement with schools is beneficial for students' success and development. Schools, families and communities all play essential roles in supporting school children (Epstein 1996). Research shows that migrant parents have high expectations regarding their children's academic achievements, but display low levels of involvement due to language barriers and cultural differences (Bergset 2017; Lan 2018). A study of Somali mothers in Denmark showed that in order to be seen as good parents by schools, they had to refrain from advocating for their children (Matthiesen 2015).

Education in Poland is compulsory for all children up to the age of eighteen. The school curriculum is designed to support intellectual, cultural, and moral development. The law on school education emphasizes cooperation between parents and school staff, stipulating that parents may have a voice in school matters through parents' councils and consultation on how schools operate (Prawo Oświatowe, Articles 84–86). Although Polish schools do involve parents to some degree (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2017), researchers argue that "without close cooperation with the family, the primary and fundamental environment for a child's development, the school—as an institution—is unable to perform its educational and formative tasks. Teachers do not have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their students […]. There are no opportunities to jointly seek ways to resolve difficulties" (Młynek 2021: 35). Each party in the school environment has their own perspective and interests, shaped by

individual and external factors, which may hinder cooperation and mutual understanding.

Khang and Vân (2016) analyzed Vietnamese children's integration in Polish schools and found that "the problem of the language barrier becomes even more serious when the parents are less educated and cannot speak the host language. In such circumstances, students must deal with almost all of the difficulties and problems at school themselves owing to their parents' inability to communicate with the school" (Khang, Vân 2016: 132). Badowska (2018) showed that even when a Vietnamese parent has near-native proficiency in Polish, their child may still struggle to integrate well in a Polish school due to a lack of tolerance shown by their peers and a failure by parents and teachers to promote attitudes of openness at school.

A report by Błeszyńska (2010: 9) focusing on school staff revealed that one in three participants had difficulty understanding foreign parents due to the latter's limited Polish language skills. These parents were seen as difficult individuals who faced legal and economic problems, lacked understanding of Polish culture, disregarded schools' expectations, and failed to engage in school life or cooperate with other parents. Such criticism did not result in any attempts to increase migrant parents' involvement; teachers kept their distance and rarely met with them (Błeszyńska 2010: 101). A more recent study shows that, while migrant parents appear to be satisfied with their children's schooling, teachers report weak parental engagement in supporting school performance and motivating their children (Slany et al. 2023). Jaworska (2019) analyzed the education of migrant children settled in Gdańsk from the perspectives of school directors, teachers, parents, and pupils, juxtaposing the findings with the city's integration policies. She reported that "upon arrival in the new country, the parents experienced profound culture shock. The schools required the children to comply with rules that their parents were unfamiliar with and unable to help them navigate. For some parents, the differences between the Polish education system and the system in their country of origin were shocking" (Jaworska 2019: 35).

Existing literature highlights only a few aspects of the multidimensional limitations in school–parent relationships. We argue that the concept of vulnerability serves a useful analytical tool for examining the school--related experiences of migrant parents. Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel (2017: 505) note that "the ubiquity and elasticity of vulnerability gener-ates a sense of familiarity and common-sense or assumed understandings which conceal diverse uses with enormously varied conceptual dimen-

sions." Moreover, "vulnerability is neither conceptually straightforward nor as morally and politically neutral as its popularity may suggest" (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022: 2). The term "vulnerability" is now so widespread within and beyond the field of migration that it has become a "buzzword" (Brown, Ecclestone, Emmel 2017). The literature also presents varied uses of the term, including references to *vulnerable groups* and *people in vulnerable situations*. We argue that "vulnerable situations" place individuals in a position of temporary difficulty, while still recognizing their resilience and agency. The educational context might be a space where this agency is supported. Acknowledging vulnerability may foster trust and collaboration, and turn "high levels of uncertainty into opportunities for learning" (Jopling, Zimmermann 2023: 841). Our research indicates that the vulnerable situations migrant parents encounter when interacting with schools reinforce their status as a vulnerable group and make it difficult for them to progress beyond that designation.

The purpose of this article is to explore the complexities of migrant parents' vulnerability as they interact with the Polish education system. We aim to identify new aspects and interpretations of migrant parents' vulnerability within the school context. In the following section, we examine how vulnerability is defined by both migrants and educators, followed by a discussion of our methods, fieldwork participants, and positionality. We then analyze structural vulnerabilities (such as access to schooling, religion in schools, and cultural differences), as well as those of a situational nature, and the interconnections between them.

DEFINING VULNERABILITY AMONG MIGRANTS AND IN EDUCATION

Vulnerability has been studied extensively by migration scholars, yet the term is not used in colloquial Polish and appears only rarely in academic discourse. Despite these challenges, we explore the applicability of the concept of vulnerability in Polish contexts. The plethora of definitions in other languages has led to the haphazard use of the term, often without full conceptualization—that is, without clarifying the purpose for which it is used or the context in which it applies (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022). The definition given by the International Organization for Migration emphasizes the "limited capacity" of an individual or group to resist harm, and "the unique interaction of individual, household, community and structural characteristics and conditions" (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022: 5). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines migrants in vulnerable situations as persons "who are unable to

effectively enjoy their human rights, are at increased risk of violations and abuse and who, accordingly, are entitled to call on a duty bearer's heightened duty of care" (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022: 4).

In the Polish legal context, especially family law, vulnerability refers to the risk of harm associated with child neglect—that is, parents failing to fulfill their obligations toward their children (Helios 2020). However, the law remains silent on the issue of parental vulnerability. Our research suggests that a lack of support for parents within the education system may exacerbate this problem. Contemporary educational policy provides a basis for parent–school partnerships, but largely on paper (Łukasiewicz-
-Wieleba 2017). Schools struggle to cooperate even with non-migrant parents, and have fewer tools—and little support—for working with migrant parents. The absence of systemic support for teachers, migrant students, and their parents makes meaningful change difficult without strong individual motivation. According to the Law on School Education (Chapter 3, Article 44), cooperation with parents is included in school performance evaluations. In practice, however, there is hardly any support for at-risk parents.

Migration can be a positive experience, but it "remains a highly stressful event that requires significant individual and collective adaptation for both voluntary and forced migrants" (Olcese et al. 2024: 1). The people involved face new challenges and obstacles. In this context, vulnerability has been conceptualized in three domains: risk, capacity, and the axis of autonomy and dependency (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022). Few scholars analyze the potential for schools to further entrench vulnerability. Schmid and Garrells (2021) studied mostly migrant students in Norwegian vocational schools who had been identified as vulnerable due to low academic achievements, and a heightened risk of dropping out. The students emphasized the importance of parental support, including social and psychological encouragement, supervision of schoolwork, and practical help (Schmid, Garrels 2021: 9–11). They also reported that their parents had high aspirations for them, and expressed a sense of obligation and gratitude towards their parents (Schmid, Garrels 2021). Another study on vulnerability, in English and German schools, with its analyses taking the perspectives of teachers and youngsters, suggested that effective solutions should address both groups together, since student vulnerability is "simultaneously reflected in the experiences of the teachers" (Jopling, Zimmermann 2023: 840).

As indicated above, migrant parents' vulnerability in school contexts has not been studied extensively to date, though the experiences of parents

within education systems globally have been addressed. We focus here on literature related to Poland. Młynek (2021) notes that interaction with schools can be difficult for parents whose own school experiences were negative, or who feel anxious about their children's education. Migrant parents might be vulnerable due to not having the same rights, information, or opportunities for involvement in school matters as local parents. Theoretically, the interface between a school and parents can follow one of three different models: (1) cooperation—in which the school is active and both sides share information and support; (2) conflict—in which the school is passive, while active parents expect action; and (3) interference—in which the school is active, but passive parents object to school activities. In conflict situations, parents may clash with the school, seek outside help, or sever contact entirely (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2017: 5). Furthermore, individuals or groups are commonly identified as vulnerable if they lack the capacity "to safeguard their own rational interests" (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022, citing Luna 2009). This raises an important question: do parents have the capacity to advocate effectively for their own and their children's interests? Research shows that parents with higher education are more likely to communicate with schools and engage in their children's homework, and hold higher expectations for their children. The extent and nature of parental involvement is an important factor in explaining differences in educational achievement (Schmid, Garrels 2021: 5).

Vulnerability is often divided into innate (natural), situational (the product of past, present, or future situations and experiences), and structural (the product of structural characteristics and dynamics) (Gilodi, Albert, Nienaber 2022: 7). This categorization inspired us to analyze our interlocutors' experiences through situational and structural lenses. While analyzing migrant parents' vulnerability, we also stress their resilience. The various factors that contribute to situational or structural vulnerability might also support growing resilience. Community support, social capital, beliefs, and attitudes have all been shown to reinforce resilience (cf. Olcese et al. 2024).

METHODS, FIELDWORK PARTICIPANTS, AND RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITY

This article is part of a larger study on children with migration backgrounds in schools in western Poland. The data informing this article come from 50 ethnographic interviews conducted with migrant parents whose children attend schools in Poznań, Kalisz, and Śrem. The cities

vary in population size and, consequently, in the educational and social opportunities available to residents. The interviews were conducted in Polish or English between April 2023 and July 2024, and lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. When parents spoke neither Polish nor English, we worked with an interpreter (for example, in the case of a Vietnamese family). We also conducted 12 participatory observations of discussions, workshops, and informational meetings for migrant parents, organized by local formal and informal networks, as well as meetings for teachers, intercultural assistants, and other professionals working with migrant families. In addition, 12 official interviews and several informal conversations were conducted with school staff (teachers, headmasters, psychologists, intercultural assistants) to better understand the school milieu. All parents were informed of the study and gave their oral consent. The approval of the school principal or organizer was obtained for Participatory observations that took place during school functions or events.

The parents were recruited through personal contacts, referrals from school staff, migrant-led informal groups, and migrant assistance programs. To preserve anonymity, we do not name specific organizations, but wish to point out that they are quite diverse and serve migrants from a range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Our goal was to recruit a varied group of parents. In many interviews, alongside some positive experiences, we learned of challenges and situations that may indicate experiences of vulnerability. We conceptualize these later in the paper.

Now for a few words about our positionality, which might have influenced our research approach and the interpretation of our findings. Currently, Wiktoria works as a high school psychologist. Previous relationships with immigrant groups, including volunteer activities, provided her with socio-cultural insight into the realities faced by immigrants in the communities and schools under study. Izabella's academic and activist work has focused on integration, social inclusion, and migrants' experiences in different countries. She has spent extensive periods abroad as a migrant herself. Her daughter completed state primary schooling in Poland and attended a public school in Washington D.C. for one year (5th grade) (Main 2023).

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

In this section, we discuss themes related to vulnerability identified through content analysis of our interviews and contextualized within

existing literature. Certain features of the Polish education system may reinforce migrant parents' vulnerability: communication difficulties; limited multicultural textbook content; and a lack of state schools offering instruction in English. Teachers often do not acknowledge that children with a migration background may have different needs (Kościółek 2020: 6). School staff are generally unprepared for working with foreign children and their parents (Supreme Audit Office, 2024), and they do not receive the support they need (Struzik et al. 2021). Access to materials and targeted training is very limited (Pamuła-Behrens and Szymańska 2020). We argue that migrant parents are at risk of vulnerability from their very first contact with schools. But where does structural vulnerability begin? What aspects of the school context that affect parents (and students) contribute to vulnerable situations? These questions emerged during interviews with migrant parents living in Poznań and nearby cities. The respondents described a lack of opportunities for learning in languages other than Polish, insufficient access to information, and language barriers. Some also raised concerns about religious education and religion-related activities in schools.

Access to schooling

School relationships are a key factor in providing social support and promoting emotional stability for forced migrants arriving in Poland (Popyk 2024: 179). Foreign parents who do not speak Polish might look for public primary schools where more than one language is spoken, yet the only such option is that of private international schools (cf. Czerniejewska 2014: 249). A parent from the United States said:

> This is one of the biggest challenges and why it was difficult for the company to approve to bring us here, because if you have children and need schooling, it is hard… I have several friends who could not stay because of that, and also for us, I had to really think through the decision to stay because our children now they are school age, and this has been emotional and a hard part of living here. We heard about the international school and were told that this was the only place for us […], it did not sit well with us, but we signed up because we were told that this was the only option. It did not work for us, my son did not do well, we did not like how things were managed.

The family came to Poznań due to the husband's job contract. However, they returned to the US due to the shortage of schools available with English instruction.

Another English-speaking parent who moved to Poland from India told us about a conflict with his former Polish partner regarding their child's schooling. When their daughter reached primary school age, the father wanted to send her to a private international school, so that she could "talk to her grandparents in India," whereas her mother was in favor of a state-run Polish school. The father spoke little Polish, and admitted that he feared exclusion from the school community. He had already experienced exclusion during their daughter's kindergarten years, when few Polish parents were willing to speak English, and he was unable to follow teachers' presentations or the general discussion during school meetings. Reflecting on the preschool experience, the father said : "I tried to avoid meetings in pre-school. I went for the beginning of the school year, and for the theatre play, when I knew there would be some families where the parents spoke English, so I'd be able to communicate."

The poor choice both in state-run and private schools may reinforce migrant parents' vulnerability. When they opt for a state-run school (with instruction in Polish), they are often excluded from getting involved in school life, experience stressful situations, and in ethnically mixed families the Polish parent interacts with the school, while the other is omitted.

Jakub Kościółek notes (2020) that language proficiency is one of the most important factors contributing to children's integration into the system. We argue that lack of shared language can be a significant discriminatory factor for parents, due to the opacity of school rules and curricula, which often exposes both parents and students to further difficulties and exclusion from regular school life. Furthermore, parents reported limited access to information regarding school choices and recruitment processes. Many did not know how to enroll their children in school, or were unable to find much information about specific schools, especially if they did not speak Polish (Czerniejewska, Main, Sydow 2022). A report on Ukrainian children who arrived after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Czerniejewska, Karczewska 2024) suggested that Ukrainian parents may be unable to support their children at school— for example when preparing for the eighth-grade exam or during the application process for secondary or vocational schools. Some schools hired intercultural assistants—usually speakers of Russian, Ukrainian, or both—and some institutions organized meetings to explain the exam and enrollment system. These support measures were offered in Ukrainian or Russian, but other migrant parents were excluded. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) assisting migrants reported numerous cases of desperate efforts to secure school places, frequent misunderstandings, and

a lack of transparency regarding available options. These difficulties were aggravated by the situational vulnerability of Ukrainian parents, which we analyze below.

Some parents spoke of an overall sense of confusion they had experienced. They did not use the term vulnerability; however, we argue that this may be another form of vulnerability exacerbated by the school system. A mother from Belarus, who came to Poland with her husband and two boys of primary school age, shared that her main concern was the standard of education in Poland and lack of support from teachers. She emphasized that she did not understand the rules in Polish schools.

> *There will be a trip, there will be a meeting* [about the information received from a school teacher], *just short messages like that. And then after some time, she* [the school teacher] *writes that the class is very complicated, like they argue, but at meetings* [parents' meetings] *nothing. And I don't understand, is it my son like that, or is it the class that's arguing, and I don't know what to do then.*

The confusion was never addressed and was perceived by teachers as lack of involvement. As Baraldi (2022: 197) wrote: "One of the biggest barriers is recognized in parents' lack of language skills, which influences the capacity of parents to support their children in the school context, participate in communication with teachers, and understand the school requirements."

Religious context of schools

Polish schools revolve around the Christian religious calendar (except Orthodox), a calendar that excludes other religious celebrations. School vacations follow Christmas, Easter and All Saints' Day celebrations. In addition there is a non-obligatory religious retreat before Easter, when classes are cancelled. Our Muslim interlocutors did not see this as a problem; they would take their children out of school to celebrate Muslim holidays in the mosque, absenting from the school. Their attitude might represent adaptive strategies, as mentioned by some: "we don't want to be seen as problematic, including in the context of school." Orthodox Ukrainian parents said that they celebrated on different days, and their children had to miss classes to celebrate Orthodox Christmas or Easter.

This mismatch between different religious calendars results in children missing classes, catching up on lessons on their own, and being "othered." Parents also need to organize activities for children when schools close for Christian holidays, and arrange for participation in Muslim or Orthodox

religion classes outside the school setting. This raises an interesting question: Why do these parents not show their frustration? Have they resigned themselves to the status quo? Do they prioritize integration over confrontation? This quiet acceptance and adaptation reveals subtle social dynamics as migrant parents seek to blend into the school community and broader Polish society.

As Roszak and Kudła (2023) have shown, faith-based education in schools includes lessons on religion and religious retreats, but also the visible display of crosses in school classrooms, communal prayer, and saying grace before meals. We argue that such practices may contribute to feelings of exclusion among pupils—some of whom are migrants—who belong to religious minority groups, and indirectly among their parents. This, however, requires further study.

Cultural differences

The next example illustrates a conflict between a parent and a school. Maya, a single mother of a fifth-grader, is originally from India but came to Poland from the US, where she had spent most of her adult life. She speaks Polish, and we conducted the interview in Polish. Despite being an engaged parent who maintained regular communication with her daughter's school, Maya was reported to the Municipal Social Welfare Center for verification of whether she was taking proper care of her daughter. According to Maya, the issues began when she took her daughter to India during the school year. Although she informed her daughter's teacher about the trip, she failed to provide an official justification. The specific school context, including teacher absences and staffing changes, exacerbated the miscommunication between Maya and school staff. The situation escalated when school staff expressed disapproval of the food Maya packed for her daughter to eat at school.

> M: *The headmistress said that all Polish children eat sandwiches, and it doesn't really matter whether she likes sandwiches or not. She has to bring a sandwich every day, because that's how it is in Poland, and I should adapt.*
> W: And what did she eat for lunch then?
> M: *She had fruits, vegetables, and other things, crisps, crackers… She doesn't like rolls or bread.*
> W: And they couldn't get that?
> M: *No, no, because the lady of the common room reported that it was abnormal food. I said that fruit and vegetables were healthy. But when they wrote to the social welfare center they said she came to school without food…*

Polish law considers parental neglect a specific form of violence (Helios 2020) and requires family courts to act in any situation that endangers a child's welfare. As a result, schools are obligated to report any acts that might be harmful to a minor. While there are definitions of what constitutes a threat to a child's welfare—including the neglect of a child's physical, emotional, intellectual, economic, cultural, or educational needs—school representatives are responsible for the interpretation of these criteria. "Teachers and students are affected by how institutions frame and enact these policies and their contradictions" (Jopling, Zimmerman 2023: 835). Maya's case illustrates how policy implementation affects vulnerability. She spoke about the self-doubt and stress caused by the situation, and how she felt compelled to make extra efforts to explain herself and assert her rights. These included visits to the school headmaster and teachers, as well as meetings with Social Welfare representatives. She also noted that she was explicitly required to behave differently from other parents: following the visit, she was not allowed to let her daughter play outside unsupervised, even though other parents in her neighborhood regularly permitted their children to do so. Her experience exemplifies different reactions depending on country of origin:

> M: *It is obviously racist. Until I said India, as long as I was from the USA, it was ok…*
> W: Seriously?
> M: *Well, that's my feeling. It seems to me that this was the point when they changed their approach, after the holiday in India. I never made any secret of it, but you know, when someone asks me, I say that I'm from the US, because I've lived there all my life. Of course, I have Indian origins.*

We may not know the school's perspective or intentions, but we do know how Maya perceived and experienced the situation. Her case may be seen as an example of institutionalized racism (Ladson-Billings 1998), in which ingrained mindsets and beliefs sustain disparities, ultimately harming the parent and contributing to educational gaps in the girl's experience. Maya transferred her daughter to another school due to racism, misunderstandings, and communication challenges. After enrolling her there, Maya had greater hopes and expectations—but saw no meaningful difference. In the new school, her daughter experienced a mental breakdown and depression. This case illustrates multiple dimensions of vulnerability within Polish schools. Beyond imparting knowledge and skills, schools are also required to shape the educational environment and address pupils' individual needs (Kapuścińska 2021).

In Maya's experience, however, interaction with the school generated maternal anxiety, emotional distress, and parental burden.

The Vietnamese parents in our study chose to enroll their children in state-run schools. In one case, despite their positive attitude and support from their ethnic community, the parents were called in by the school principal due to their daughter's aggressive behavior toward a classmate. Neither the parents nor the daughter received any support to help them prepare for starting a new school, and because they did not speak Polish, they required interpretation. When we observed the girl and her classmates and spoke with her parents, teacher, and NGO volunteers, we identified many signs of vulnerability. The father, perceived by the school as the more stable parent, suggested that the aggressive behavior stemmed from cultural differences in interaction with schoolmates. The daughter did not understand what she had done wrong. Although the school administration provided no psychological or pedagogical support, a motivated homeroom teacher contacted a partner NGO and trainer she had previously worked with. With the school's approval, a friend--educator helped organize integration activities, psychological support, and interpretation services that the girl might need. The situation improved and the girl began to follow school rules, was able to engage with her classmates, and there was no need to call in the parents again. The lack of school support had resulted in a concerned teacher seeking external help. Cultural differences and language barriers heightened frustration on both sides; initially, the teacher had no idea what was causing the problem, how to resolve it, or who was responsible.

Situational vulnerability

Gilodi, Albert and Nienaber (2022: 8) note that people experience situational vulnerability "because of a specific situation or experience that they have been through (e.g. victims of violence), are living through (e.g. homeless people), or may be exposed to (e.g. inhabitants of a seismic area)". This conceptualization implies vulnerability's temporariness. It highlights a specific situation and its relation to experienced vulnerability, rather than labeling certain groups as vulnerable. This approach is particularly relevant to migrants in the situation of (temporary) contact with schools.

Observations and interviews with Ukrainian parents indicate that vulnerability resulting from fleeing armed conflict was recognized by local communities, policy makers and school representative who offered

support and understanding. Ukrainian parents often talked about the help they received upon arrival. They mentioned being offered places to stay, people's kindness, and language support. They talked about how their children were welcomed at school by peers and school staff. Students could use online translators during lessons, some of them were placed in preparatory classes, and all of them were offered additional language classes. Parents were provided with language help from intercultural assistants. Our research, especially in smaller towns, shows significant involvement by local NGOs, who helped in organizing trips and activities for children. As Pogorzała (2023: 113) described, "the main organizational and teaching effort was made by local governments and school communities, with minimal participation by the Ministry of Education and Science, limited to general declarations concerning the directions of state policy in this area and the introduction of legal changes, but not always corresponding to the demands of local government or the educational community."

Over time, compassion fatigue set in; peers and teachers became less involved. Parents said that their children were told to go back to Ukraine. Observations at schools and informal conversations with teachers and educators revealed that teachers were exhausted and frustrated, often shouting at students, not reacting to bullying, or leaving conflicts unresolved. During an observation in one of the primary schools, a teacher forced a Ukrainian student to sing a song in Polish in front of other students. For some parents and children, the longer they stayed in Poland, the better they adjusted, but for others, who treated Polish schooling for their children as temporary, the protracted situation brought new challenges and vulnerabilities.

Olgja, the mother of a teenage boy, fled the Belarusian regime in 2023 and sought to enroll her son in a Polish school. She walked around the neighborhood, visited various schools, asked questions, and explored the options. There was one school she particularly liked from the outside. She walked in and asked the secretary about the enrollment process. However, after mentioning that she was from Belarus, she was called a "fascist Jewess" and was subsequently denied the opportunity to enroll her son. This racist response may have reflected the secretary's personal views about the regime in Belarus, and her perception of Belarussians as jointly responsible for the regime and the war in Ukraine. Legally, there were no grounds for refusal, and Olgja's son would probably have had to be admitted to the school. However, this no longer mattered to Olgja. It was one of her first experiences. Once again, it seems that a vulnerable position

stemming from a purely situational factor was intensified by prejudice and racism, coming together to create an individual experience. However, this story ends with a word of wisdom for Olgja's teenage son:

> O: *In Belarus, you think so untruthfully. It's not like here. Here you can write your thoughts, no one will say they are not valid.*
> W: And you wanted this freedom?
> O: *Well, yes. And when there was this case, when this lady, she called me a Jewess, my son was ready to go to the director and tell him about it. He said, my mother cried so much. When I calmed down, I told him: Now I can answer your question about why we came here. Because I want you to be able to stand up for yourself. And I came from Belarus in such fear that I couldn't even answer the secretary. She said those things to me in front of everybody. I was there, and I was crying! Poles and Ukrainians were sitting there, and I was crying. I didn't know how to get out. And I told him: that's why I brought you here, so that you can grow up in such freedom that you can say what you want.*

Although the family values freedom of expression, one might ask how such discriminatory comments exacerbate situational vulnerability. Another example of situational vulnerability involved a Chinese father of three school-age children whose wife was in a car accident. He had to organize care for his wife, take care of their children, get them to school, and manage their homework—all while continuing to work in his job. He spoke little Polish and was unfamiliar with the healthcare or school systems, which led to emotional overload. His wife's medical emergency temporarily placed him in the role of a single parent, exposing him to a situation of vulnerability similar to that experienced by many women fleeing the war in Ukraine, who have also faced challenges related to temporary or permanent single parenthood.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis highlights situations in which migrant parents find themselves in vulnerable positions. While vulnerability is often associated with physical or emotional harm, our examples suggest that in the educational context it is primarily a socially constructed phenomenon. In cases where vulnerability already existed, we posit that the education system may have exacerbated it. Furthermore, we have described situations in which vulnerability was not explicitly declared, but we argue that it manifested as hidden inequality. We acknowledge that mutual limitations in language proficiency—on the part of both researchers and parents—may have influenced the information gathered during the

interviews. This raises the question of whether explicitly referring to difficulties reflects limitations in the interviews, cultural differences, or conscious and unconscious adaptation strategies.

Our interviews show that migrant families require structural and systemic changes, rather than relying on the goodwill of teachers or NGOs. Our interlocutors suggested that situational vulnerabilities—such as fleeing armed or political conflict, living in group accommodation centers, or raising a child alone—can evolve into structural vulnerabilities. These occur when unresolved difficulties, combined with limited resources, lead to further challenges, including educational or psychological ones. Furthermore, situational vulnerabilities often intersect with existing structural limitations, resulting in structural vulnerabilities (related to the country of origin, religion, skin color, gender, or economic situation). However, structural vulnerabilities experienced by parents in schools may also stem from temporary issues (for example, staff turnover) or more permanent issues (such as the lack of language support or inadequate professional training for school staff). The recently adopted strategy for migration policy in Poland, combined with the current pre-election narratives on migration and integration, leaves little room for optimism in regard to state support for migrants, including parents and children at school.

Parents build resilience through both internal and external support factors, which we intend to investigate further. In this paper, our primary focus was on parents and their perspectives. However, future research would benefit from incorporating a wider range of viewpoints. The question we continue to ask is whether the tools that schools use to support parents in vulnerable moments are genuinely helpful or rather contribute to vulnerability. Parental vulnerability, as experienced through children's schooling, is part of a relational process that may have further consequences. These vulnerabilities can be transferred to children and communities, shaping their inclusion or exclusion from education opportunities, and potentially creating a cycle of vulnerability that extends into the future.

REFERENCES

Badowska Mariola, 2018, *"Jestem inna?". Indywidualne doświadczenia edukacyjne Polki pochodzenia wietnamskiego,* in: Przemysław Gębal (ed.), *Edukacja wobec migracji. Konteksty glottodydaktyczne i pedagogiczne,* Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, pp. 183–204.

Baraldi Claudio, 2022, *Conclusions,* in: Claudio Baraldi (ed.), *Exploring the Narratives and Agency of Children with Migrant Backgrounds within Schools,* Taylor and Francis, pp. 190––201.

Baraldi Claudio, Gavioli Laura, 2022, *Language mediation in schools. The case of parent–teacher meetings*, in: Claudio Baraldi (ed.), *Exploring the Narratives and Agency of Children with Migrant Backgrounds within Schools*, Taylor and Francis, pp. 165–189.

Bergset Kari, 2017, *School involvement: Refugee parents' narrated contribution to their children's education while resettled in Norway*. "Outlines: Critical Social Studies", 18(1): 61–80.

Błeszyńska Krystyna, 2010, *Dzieci obcokrajowców w polskich placówkach oświatowych — perspektywa szkoły. Raport z badań*, Warszawa: Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji.

Brown Kate, Ecclestone Kathryn, Emmel Nick, 2017, *The many faces of vulnerability*, "Social Policy and Society", 16(3): 497–510.

Christie Sarah, Szorenyi Agnes, 2015, *Theorizing the relationship between UK schools and immigrant parents of eastern and central European origin: The parents' perspective*, "International Journal about Parents in Education", 9(1).

Czerniejewska Izabela, 2014, *Public or international? Migrating students in two types of schools in Poznań*, "Studia Migracyjne — Przegląd Polonijny", 40(3): 243–258.

Czerniejewska Izabela, Karczewska Julia, 2024, *Nie tylko pierwszy rok. Potrzeby uczniów i uczennic z doświadczeniem migracji/uchodźctwa w polskiej szkole*, Poznań: Ośrodek Doskonalenia Nauczycieli.

Czerniejewska Izabela, Main Izabella, Sydow Karolina, 2022, *Potrzeby mieszkanek i mieszkańców Poznania z doświadczeniem migracyjnym dotyczące integracji społecznej*, Poznań: Centrum Badań Migracyjnych.

Epstein Joyce L., 1996, *New connections for sociology and education: Contributing to school reform*, "Sociology of Education", 69: 6–23.

Faircloth Charlotte, 2023, *Intensive Parenting and the Expansion of Parenting*, in: Ellie Lee, Jennie Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth et al., *Parenting Culture Studies*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 33–67.

Gilodi Amalia, Albert Isabelle, Nienaber Birte, 2022, *Vulnerability in the context of migration: A critical overview and a new conceptual model*, "Human Arenas", 7: 620–640.

Gromada Anna, Richardson Dominic, Rees Gwyther, 2020, *Childcare in a Global Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Work and Family Life*, UNICEF Office of Research — Innocenti.

Heaslip Vanessa, Ryden Julie, 2013, *Introduction*, in: Vanessa Heaslip, Julie Ryden (eds.), *Understanding Vulnerability: A Nursing and Healthcare Approach*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 1–4.

Hillis Susan, Tucker Sydney, Baldonado Nicole et al., 2024, *The effectiveness of hope groups, a mental health, parenting support, and violence prevention program for families affected by the war in Ukraine: Findings from a pre-post study*, "Journal of Migration and Health", 10: 100251.

Helios Joanna, 2020, *Zaniedbanie dziecka w ujęciu prawnym*, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Przegląd Prawa i Administracji", 120(2): 367–378.

Jaworska Dorota, 2019, *Edukacja uczniów migrujących w perspektywie miejskiej polityki integracyjnej w Gdańsku*, "Edukacja", 3(150): 29–41.

Jopling Michael, Zimmermann David, 2023, *Exploring vulnerability from teachers' and young people's perspectives in school contexts in England and Germany*, "Research Papers in Education", 38(5): 828–845.

Kapuścińska Monika, 2021, *Realizacja funkcji opiekuńczej szkoły jako warunek powodzenia procesu dydaktycznego i wychowawczego w XXI wieku*, "Kultura–Przemiany–Edukacja", 9: 170–181.

Khang Duy Nguyễn, Vân Phan Thi Tuyet, 2016, *Vietnamese immigration in Poland: Issues of education and integration for children?*, "Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji / Issues in Early Education", 35(4): 127–144.

Kościółek Jakub, 2020, *Children with migration backgrounds in Polish schools: problems and challenges*, "Annales. Series Historia et Sociologia", 30(4): 600–607.

Ladson-Billings Gloria, 1998, *Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?*, "International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education", 11(1): 7–24.

Lan Pei-Chia, 2018, *Raising Global Families: Parenting, Immigration, and Class in Taiwan and the US*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Luna Florencia, 2009, *Elucidating the concept of vulnerability: Layers not labels*, "International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics", 2(1): 121–139.

Łukasiewicz-Wieleba Joanna, 2017, *Współdziałanie nauczycieli i rodziców*, "Warszawskie Innowacje Edukacyjno-Społeczne", 10: 2–9.

Main Izabella, 2023, *Dzieciństwo, "uczenie się" i sprawczość. Autoetnograficznie o doświadczeniach szkoły podstawowej w Waszyngtonie*, "Etnografia. Teorie, Praktyki, Doświadczenia", 9: 163–182.

Manzoni Chiara, Rolfe Heather, 2019, *How Schools Are Integrating New Migrant Pupils and Their Families*, National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

Matthiesen Noomi Ch. L., 2015, *A struggle for equitable partnerships: Somali diaspora mothers' acts of positioning in the practice of home-school partnerships in Danish public schools*, "Outlines — Critical Practice Studies", 16(1): 6–25.

Młynek Patrycja, 2021, *Współpraca środowisk: szkolnego i rodzinnego z perspektywy rodziców i nauczycieli*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.

Olcese Martina, Cardinali Paola, Madera Francesco et al., 2024, *Migration and community resilience: A scoping review*, "International Journal of Intercultural Relations", 98: 101924.

Pamuła-Behrens Małgorzata, Szymańska Marta, 2020, *Teaching the learners with a migrant background—teachers' perspectives*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica", 56(1): 53–70.

Paul Shitangsu K., 2013, *Vulnerability concepts and its application in various fields: a review on geographical perspective*, "Journal of Life and Earth Science", 8: 63–81.

Pogorzała Ewa, 2023, *System oświaty w Polsce wobec napływu dzieci-uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy po 24 lutego 2022 roku*, "Acta Politica Polonica", 55(1): 113–121.

Popyk Anzhela, 2024, *Rola rodziców w doświadczeniach migracyjnych i edukacyjnych dzieci z Ukrainy w Polsce*, "Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, Badania, Praktyka", 23(2): 171–190.

Roszak Piotr, Kudła Weronika, 2023, *Faith-based education in Polish public schools — From battleground to common ground*, "International Journal of Educational Development", 9: 102773.

Schmid Evi, Garrels Veerle, 2021, *Parental involvement and educational success among vulnerable students in vocational education and training*, "Educational Research", 63(4): 456–473.

Slany Krystyna, Ślusarczyk Magdalena, Struzik Justyna, Warat Marta, 2023, *Polska szkoła w perspektywie dzieci migranckich: doświadczenia, praktyki i rekomendacje*, Komitet

Badań nad Migracjami PAN (https://publikacje.pan.pl/Content/130022/PDF/Eksper tyza_KBnM_2023.pdf).

Struzik Justyna, Slany Krystyna, Ślusarczyk Magdalena, Warat Marta, 2021, *"We do everything with our own hands": Everyday experiences of teachers working with migrant children in Poland*, "Studia Migracyjne — Przegląd Polonijny", 47(4): 139–157.

<div align="center">❖   ❖   ❖</div>

Prawo Oświatowe [Law on School Education] Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe. Dz.U. z 2024 r. poz. 737, 854.

Supreme Audit Office, 2024, *Foreigners' children in Polish schools* (https://www.nik.gov.pl/en/news/foreigners-children-in-polish-schools.html).

Abstract

Vulnerability among migrant parents is analyzed as a critical experience that impacts educational equity and social integration. In the context of the education system in Poland, migrant parents may face challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and limited resources that hinder their ability to engage with schools and advocate for their children's needs. Despite some research acknowledging these challenges, there remains a gap in fully understanding the complex factors that contribute to the vulnerability of migrant parents and how this intersects with education. The article aims to address that gap by focusing on migrant parents' vulnerability and unpacking the concept of vulnerability and its various forms. It raises questions about the consequences of vulnerable situations that migrant parents experience due to sudden events and systemic challenges. Through ethnographic interviews and observation among parents with migration experience and school personnel, the study provides new insights into the systemic barriers faced by migrant parents, and explores new meanings of vulnerability. The study recognizes the existence of multifaceted vulnerability among migrant parents within the educational context, presents key systemic challenges, and provides examples of different parental experiences, including both their own responses and those of institutional actors.

key words: vulnerability, migrant parents, migrant children, education system in Poland