Acta Baltico-Slavica

Acta Baltico-Slavica, 49
Warszawa 2025

Article No. 3477
DOI: 10.11649/abs.3477
Citation: Stankiewicz, K., & Żurek, A. (2025). From Poland to Germany and back: Return migration in the context of education – A case study. *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, *49*, Article 3477. https://doi.org/10.11649/abs.3477

Katarzyna Stankiewicz
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw
Warsaw
katarzyna.stankiewicz@uksw.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0554-4261

Anna Żurek
University of Wrocław
Wrocław
anna.zurek@uwr.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4216-3636

From Poland to Germany and Back: Return Migration in the Context of Education – A Case Study[1]

Introduction

The geographical proximity of the countries of the Baltic Sea region fosters numerous linguistic and cultural contacts between their inhabitants. For Poles, one of the most frequently selected migration destinations in this area is Germany, which is attractive not only for its relatively short distance but also for its good employment conditions and higher wages as well as its relatively easily accessible social benefits. Interest in

[1] This publication is a result of the research project no. UMO-2020/39/D/HS6/00162, financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s) 2025.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences
[Wydawca: Instytut Slawistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk]

this direction of migration increased further in 2004, after Poland's accession to the European Union. Among Polish emigrants, there are both poorly educated physical workers and highly qualified professionals working in various industries as managers or engineers (Nowosielski, 2019).

Moving to Germany affects not only working individuals who migrate but also their families, especially children and young people. With regard to upbringing and education, learning the German language and integrating into German society becomes highly important. Equally vital is the formation of the Polish national identity of members of the younger generation and the development of their command of Polish under conditions of Polish-German bilingualism (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2021), allowing preparation for the possible return of the family from emigration and the return of the child to a Polish school, which is the focus of this article.

This paper aims to exemplify return migration from Germany to Poland in the context of the child's education as seen from the perspective of the parents and the student. It is based on an analysis of a case of successful adaptation. Through an individual case study, the research is to identify specific factors that contribute to effective educational and socio-cultural reintegration. By presenting this specific case, the study may improve understanding of the reintegration process.

The article opens with a literature review, focusing on cultural challenges faced by Poles emigrating to Germany, the differences between education in Poland and Germany, and the educational context of return migration. Against this background, what follows is a presentation of a case study of the return of a girl of middle childhood age from Germany to a Polish school. Based on the interviews with the student and her parents, several sections analyse her time spent in the German education system, her language and identity development, and her preparation for returning to Poland and her Polish school. The selected case functions as a model for the preparation for re-migration, the support of the child in this regard, and the positive conditions for return. It will serve to formulate recommendations in this respect.

1. Polish emigration in Germany: Cultural challenges

Although migrants from Poland constitute a large group in Germany (according to the German Federal Statistical Office, Poles are the fifth largest group of migrants, after nationals from Turkey, Ukraine, Syria and Romania; Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2025), in both Polish and German academic discourse they are generally presented as an invisible group due to their high degree of integration into German society (cf. Nowosielski, 2019, p. 76). This results from the fact that the process of integration of Poles into German society takes place without major problems, and that the attitude of German society towards Polish migrants has been changing positively

in recent years, especially in comparison with attitudes towards non-EU newcomers. As Michał Nowosielski notes, "recently, Poles have been held up as a kind of model of integration" (Nowosielski, 2019, p. 96).

At the same time, numerous Polish diaspora organisations (including those connected with the Catholic Church) and the possibility of regular contacts with relatives remaining in the country allow emigrants to maintain their national identity and cultivate the Polish language, culture and traditions. As research shows, Polish migrants in Germany generally appreciate Polish culture and are attached to it (Jeran et al., 2019, pp. 39–40; cf. Szmytkowska & Studzińska, 2022). This is a group that, to the best of their ability and competence, tries to pass on those attitudes to the next generation. The parents take care to preserve their children's connection to the Polish language and culture, justifying this on the grounds of patriotism, the desire to maintain contact with relatives in Poland, and practical reasons – preparation for a possible return to Poland (Jeran et al., 2019, pp. 46–47).

Researchers also point to the emergence (in recent years) of a new group of Polish migrants, who can be described as the "cosmopolitan generation". Members of this group try not to emphasise their Polish origins but do not hide their connection to the Polish language or culture. It is apparent that these are people who, after Poland's accession to the European Union and the improvement of everyday living conditions along Western lines, no longer have a complex about their origins and find themselves – also culturally – fully fledged citizens of the European Union (Jeran et al., 2019, p. 55).

However, considering the cultural adaptation process of Poles in Germany, certain differences can prove to be a hindrance, even leading to culture shock, misunderstanding and frustration. This applies both to adults functioning in a working environment and to children who attend German schools. When mentioning Polish and German cultural differences, it is worth noting that quite a lot of variation occurs in Germany, as the country consists of federal states with a high degree of autonomy and – frequently – a different history (Helbig-Mischewski, 2014). In the case of the German lands in the North Sea region, cultural proximity to Poland is greater than elsewhere in the country. This stems not only from the geographical location and experience but also from economic and political cooperation, including the extremely important cross-border cooperation, which breaks stereotypes (cf. Klemeshev et al., 2017).

As far as cultural differences are concerned, from the perspective of the dimensions of culture as defined by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede et al., 2010), German culture, regardless of the region, is definitely more individualistic and less hierarchical than Polish culture. In addition, Poles are more ready to take various risks than Germans. Unlike Polish people, Germans are prone to control. This inclination is also linked to their attachment to rules, which allows them to be perceived as more orderly (Helbig-Mischewski, 2014; cf. Thomas & Utler, 2013). At the level of communication, it can be pointed out that Germans are more direct. This means that they express

criticism openly, which Poles may perceive as rude (Błaszkowska, 2000; cf. Thomas & Utler, 2013). The differences in question also translate into the culture of the school (cf. Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2014, p. 31).

2. Comparing education in Germany and Poland

The German and Polish school systems differ in many respects. Compulsory schooling starts at the age of six in Germany and seven in Poland. The length of various educational phases is different, which can be of considerable importance for migrant students (e.g. the primary education period in Germany is four years; in Berlin, Brandenburg and some primary schools in Bremen – six years; in Polish schools, it lasts much longer – eight years). The centralised structure of Polish education stands in opposition to the education system in Germany, which is described as "partially integrated" (Nowosad, 2012, p. 143). Each state (in German – *Land*) is responsible for education in its own territory, with oversight provided by the relevant state ministry of education. Consequently, there are differences between the states with regard to the detailed arrangements for the operation of schools. Although there are national educational standards for each type of school and level of education (like in Poland), they do not apply to all subjects. Their implementation takes place at the level of regional curricula, which, in turn, results in curricular differences between schools in different federal states (Szymczak & Strzemieczna, 2024, pp. 228–229).

The more individualised approach to the student in Germany may arise from the country's long experience of multiculturalism and the need to adapt teaching methods and content to the diverse needs of migrant students. Despite many action strategies as well as teaching and diagnostic materials to support the education of children with migration experience, the educational situation in Germany seems to be more difficult due to the greater linguistic and cultural diversity of students than in Poland (Terhart et al., 2017, pp. 243–245). In Polish schools, among students with migration experience, the most numerous group are Slavic-speaking Ukrainian children, which can certainly make it easier for them to communicate with Poles on a daily basis and learn Polish faster (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2022).

In Germany, there are three models for including students with migration experience in the classroom: the integration model, which implies full participation of migrant students in regular classes, applied at the primary school level; partial integration – students attend separate classes, gradually taking part in mainstream classes; parallel – depending on the federal state, newly arrived students attend preparatory classes for between six months and two years before moving on to mainstream classes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, pp. 81–86). Legal regulations in Poland allow for two options in this respect: the integration model, whereby migrant

students join mainstream classes and attend additional Polish language classes and remedial classes, and the separation model, in the form of preparatory classes for students who do not know Polish to the extent that would allow them to participate in regular classes. The mixed model is so far basically absent in Poland due to organisational constraints (Żurek & Stankiewicz, 2025).

In Polish schools, at the time the study participants talk about, expository methods oriented towards knowledge transfer and teacher activity were still dominant. By contrast, education in Germany was by then more student-centred and more closely linked to practice (Sari & Sassi, 2024). Problem-based, activation and teamwork-stimulating methods prevailed there. Project-based education was intended to develop students' independence, and the objective of practical activities was to help them understand the material being mastered (cf. Terhart et al., 2017).

The differences between the education systems, the approach to the student, and the teaching methods determine the course of adaptation after returning to the Polish education system. The experience of learning in a different system also changes the student's perception and expectations; it also influences parents' attitudes.

3. A "returning" student in Polish school

The term "return migration" does not have a clear definition. Generally speaking, it means returning to the home country after a prolonged (minimum of one year) stay abroad (Iglicka, 2013, p. 33). Such a return may be due to various factors determined by professional issues (e.g. loss of a job abroad), family issues (longing for family in Poland), health issues (sudden illness of a family member) or educational issues (desire to send a child to a Polish school; cf. Nowicka, 2009).

The existing literature on the challenges of the migration experience of children from returning families is limited, although recently there has been a definite growth in reflection and research on this topic, considering issues such as children's psychological wellbeing, their influence on parents' decisions to re-migrate, and the specificity of the return of children with refugee experience (cf. Grosa & King, 2023; Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). Irrespective of the direction of migration and the place of return, the researchers cite treating the child as "baggage", without taking into account their needs and expectations regarding migration and adaptation in the new place and school, as characteristic of the situation of re-migration (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). The experience of return and the process of adaptation are studied in different geographical, social and cultural contexts, with some similarities emerging for some countries and situations (e.g. returns to post-Soviet countries) (Grosa, 2022). Research conducted among Polish returnees indicates that returns can sometimes result in failure, leading to further migration, one of the reasons for which is some-

times the unsuccessful school adaptation of children (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015; White, 2014; cf. Iglicka, 2013).

As research shows, children are not passive participants in return migration; for the family, they are often a bridge between the country of residence and the country of origin (Grosa, 2022). They can definitively influence the parents' decision to return (or not). Often, a key moment for the family is when the child starts school or the final year of a certain stage of education. The decision may also be related to such factors as the desire to pass on the traditions and cultural values of the country of origin, the need to develop the mother tongue, or the longing for the family (especially grandparents). Depending on their age, length of stay abroad and place of birth, children have different expectations of return than adults. For adolescents who have already integrated into the environment of the country of settlement, a return proves more difficult – they usually do not want to leave a place where they feel at home, have friends and attend school (cf. Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015).

Students returning to Poland with the experience of learning in a different education system face various educational challenges (Stankiewicz & Żurek, 2023). Among these are the difficulty of qualifying for a particular class (which is especially important when there are large discrepancies between foreign and Polish schools), the need to make up curriculum differences, learning about different ways and criteria of assessment, and overcoming the language barrier, especially in terms of the language of instruction. In addition to the difficulties associated with the education process itself, there are also emotional issues, such as feeling alien in a new environment, stress and adaptation problems. Identity problems and a sense of rootlessness are also pointed out to hinder functioning after return (see Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015, pp. 77–98; Seretny, 2024).

It is worth noting, however, that children of Polish origin returning from abroad to Poland are often not perceived by teachers as students who require additional support and who should be given special attention, taking into account their specific needs. As Katarzyna Stankiewicz writes, "[t]reating returning students as 'ordinary students' depreciates their migration history, destroys the significance of cultural differences, the legitimacy of experiencing adaptation difficulties, etc." (Stankiewicz, 2019, p. 255).

4. Case study

For this article, a case study of a girl who returned from a German school to a Polish school was conducted. The study is part of a larger research project on the school adaptation of children from return migrant families. A brief methodological note precedes the problem-structured analysis.

4.1 Methodological note

As part of the case study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the child's parents and the student herself, supplemented by informal conversations and observations. The study aimed to explore the issue of return migration in the context of child education as seen from the perspective of the parents and the child. The following question was formulated as the main research problem: What are the peculiarities of return migration from Germany to Poland in relation to the child's educational process, school adaptation and development? The study was qualitative in nature and made it possible to explore the perspective of family members.

The family lived in one of Poland's five largest cities before migrating; they returned to the same place. The girl participating in the study is an only child. The parents were about forty years old at the time of their departure for Germany; the daughter was seven and had completed the first semester of the first grade of primary school in Poland. In Germany, she also went to the first grade. In both countries, she attended public schools. The family spent two and half years in Lower Saxony, in a town of more than 50,000 inhabitants, were the father worked. The mother did not take up employment during this period, which allowed her to focus more fully on supporting the child. The parents have a technical university degree and received their education in Poland. Both of them spoke German at the time they moved to Germany: the father – at the intermediate level, and the mother – advanced level. They also speak English.

The study was conducted a considerable time after their remigration, i.e. eight/nine years after the family's return to Poland, at a time when the daughter was preparing for her secondary school final exams and was at the stage of deciding on her further educational path. At the time of the interview, the daughter was eighteen years old. Previously, she had been observed for three years for her achievements and educational choices. The interviews, including two-stage interviews with the parents, were conducted between May 2023 and December 2024.

The case was purposively selected as an example of effective school adaptation in middle childhood following the family's return migration from Germany. It allowed formulating a number of recommendations concerning preparing for re-migration and looking at the determinants of this process. The age of the student, the two-stage interviews conducted with her parents and the time gap since their return to Poland allowed the study participants to attempt to reflect on their migration experience, their preparation for return, and the process of (re)adaptation in Poland and the Polish school.

4.2 Stay in Germany and studying at a German school

The reason for the family's transfer to Germany was the father's contract to work abroad, which the parents saw as an opportunity to earn good money and as a chance for their child to learn German through contact with the German environment, including a German school. Importantly, both parents knew the language of the host country and therefore were able to become involved in helping their daughter. Even before the transfer, she had the opportunity to learn some basic German phrases at private lessons.

The parents opted for a public primary school; like other German schools, it had a large number of children with migration experience. Significantly, there were not many Polish students there at the time and there were none in the girl's class, which allowed her to be more fully immersed in the German language. The parents consciously chose this option "so that [she] would learn the language faster" (MPI).[2] At the same time, they thought it was really important that the German school had established cooperation with one of the Polish schools from their home city.

In the interviews, both parents greatly emphasised the care that their daughter, Barbara, had received from her class teacher, who had devoted a lot of time and attention to her, recognising her educational needs and guiding her in the educational process. This also ensured her integration into the class group. In addition, there were teaching assistants in the classroom to help (two people, supporting not only students with migration experience), which ensured more individualised teaching and adaptation to the diverse needs of the students.

All interviewees, including Barbara herself, indicated that the first stage of education in the German school was more fun and less formal than in Poland. The rooms were adapted to the needs of young students, there was a playground, and the class was smaller; the children often worked in teams. Barbara remembered that German education was more focused on practice. She also stated that there was more freedom there and the curriculum content load was not as high: "I feel like the Polish school is more intensive; there are more things to learn and they are more difficult. In Germany, learning was more enjoyable – the subjects were nicer and more practical" (ChI).

In fact, every day during school hours, students were free to play outside. The first years in the German school were primarily designed to allow the children to develop their basic skills. In the case of mathematical competence, the parents noted differences from the Polish curriculum, where there are fewer exercises practising basic operations, and where word problems, which are more advanced, are introduced quite early.

[2] Quotations from interviews are referenced using the following symbols: I – interview; P – parent; M – male; F – female; Ch – child.

> In terms of maths, I noticed that there was a lot of emphasis on the basics of all these exercises: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. These children had very many tasks like those. […] Here, the children already start to do some word problems, and there – they still add, subtract, count in columns… (FPI)

One important objective in the German primary school was to develop children's fine motor skills, including through handwriting exercises, which corresponded to the requirements in the Polish system.

The girl's father remarked that the school in Germany seemed much more structured to them than the Polish one. As he said, "In our country, there is more chaos" (MPI), pointing to various aspects of school life, such as issues of planning class events; at the same time, he emphasised the efficient communication system between the school and parents.

The school Barbara went to in Germany was very culturally diverse, and the teaching environment was prepared for working with students with migration experience, which was in line with the situation in many other German schools at the time.[3] As her mother recalled, "The school was very open to emigrants, to any emigrants…" (FPI). The parents wanted their daughter to attend a school where there were not many children from Poland so that she would be more fully immersed in the German language: "She couldn't take a shortcut there by trying to talk to the Poles" (FPI). At school, Barbara interacted mainly with students of German origin. During the first few months, she attended extra lessons in German as a foreign language and remedial classes, but it soon became apparent that her competence was higher than that of other students whose language was not Germanic or Slavic. Already after the first semester, her educational achievements were in line with those of the best students with a German background. Crucial to this educational success was the support of her mother, who helped Barbara with German when necessary and tried to study lesson topics with her in advance so that she could become familiarised with the vocabulary she would need and the content to be introduced.

Barbara's linguistic and cultural integration in the school environment went smoothly, with the support of the parents and teachers as well as German-speaking peers, with whom she spent time not only at school but also at home after the lessons. She was also open to German culture. As an example, her mother referred to the custom of making Advent wreaths and lighting candles on them on successive Sundays of Advent. All interviewees also recalled Barbara's committed participation in *Rosenmontag* (Shrove Monday) as a form of carnival fun.

[3] Barbara's time in the German school coincided with the years of the European migrant crisis, which began in 2015 and brought an influx of children of asylum seekers into the German education system (see, for example, Agarwala, 2020).

However, as the mother pointed out, despite the child's early age and the support of her parents, "it was difficult at the very beginning" (FPI). Among other things, the mother saw the different culture of the school as the cause of many problems: "Of course [Barbara] had to learn all the customs at this new school. She had to meet new children, new customs… Everything was different from Poland" (FPI).

4.3 Language and identity development

For the family, it was a natural decision to speak Polish at home during their stay in Germany. However, the father admitted that sometimes, for educational purposes, as he said, they had consciously inserted German words into their conversations. The mother, in turn, recalled that she had used to address her daughter in German when her German friends came round.

The parents made sure that their child also had an opportunity to speak Polish with other people, including her peers. They regularly held meetings with Polish children of the father's colleagues, who were also temporarily in Germany. Maintaining knowledge of the language and contact with Polish culture was also enabled by regular trips to Poland to visit relatives, which initially took place about every three weeks. During those trips, Barbara had the opportunity to interact not only with her relatives but also with children from the Polish school she had previously attended. As her father recalled, "And in terms of contact with Poles in the country, we tried to go back to the family home, to the grandparents, every two, every three weeks, and there our daughter also had contact with her peers from the school she had left" (MPI). The parents also took care to maintain Polish traditions at home, particularly festive customs. There was no problem with this as the family spent every Christmas in Poland with their close relatives.

Supporting Barbara's education during her stay in Germany was primarily the responsibility of her mother, who not only helped her with her German but also systematically covered the main points of the Polish school curriculum with her. As her father noted, "We helped her [Barbara], I mean, mainly my wife, to maintain the continuity of her education" (MPI). This involved working with Polish textbooks and exercises once or twice a week, with the key focus on the development of Polish language skills: "When I was in Germany, my mum sat with me and we studied Polish all the time to improve my grammar, correct my spelling…" (ChI).

Interestingly, it is worth noting that the interviews with each family member included a recurring observation that working with Polish textbooks to learn the key topics of Polish curriculum had often met with resistance from Barbara: she was not very motivated to learn Polish and did not understand the point of those activities. For her, it was an additional duty and work that was unnecessary from the perspec-

tive of her functioning in the German environment: "[Barbara] didn't want to learn Polish because she thought that what she was doing at school, in this German school, was enough, that she didn't need [to learn Polish] because others didn't do it" (FPI). Polish seemed very complicated to her compared to German. As her mother recalled, "She even said that, in this Polish, there are only exceptions and that it cannot be comprehended because there are only exceptions…" (FPI).

The parents' decision to support their daughter in learning Polish and their care for her development as a balanced bilingual were motivated not only by practical considerations, such as their plans to return to Poland. There was also a sense of responsibility for shaping her Polish identity, which was in line with the assumption that since "she comes from Poland, she should know it [the language of her country of origin], regardless of how the future turns out to be" (FPI). Today, without hesitation, Barbara states that she feels Polish and appreciates the experience and language competence she acquired during her stay in Germany.

4.4 Return to Poland and (re)adaptation in the Polish school

Barbara was well prepared to return to the Polish education system. To reduce her stress, her parents tried to re-enrol her at the same school and class she had attended before she left. As a matter of fact, there were some new children there, and the class had completed the early school stage and had another class teacher. However, among the students there were some who remembered their classmate who had left a few years before. In addition, during their stays in Poland, especially in the first year after their departure, Barbara and her mother even peeked into the classroom several times during lessons to say hello and maintain contact with her peers and teachers.

Nevertheless, the girl had "mixed feelings about returning to Poland; she wanted to return to the Polish language but did not want to leave her new friends" (MPI). She already felt "at home" in the German school. Her re-adaptation in the Polish school involved a lot of stress. She was sometimes called "German", which – in this case – was a term intended to indicate her otherness and foreignness. What Barbara remembered from her first days back was that she was different from the rest of the children in terms of participation in popular culture and access to a mobile phone. In Germany, she did not have the opportunity to use it, whereas in Poland it was an important item that influenced the daily life of children at school. Also, students watched different cartoons and films than she did, operating in a different media space.

> Everyone in the Polish school had phones. They used their phones during breaks and I didn't have my phone. In the German school, every break was outdoors; you had to go outside and play; and in Poland we were not allowed to go outside […]. There was a gap in interests – I watched *Monster High* and *Barbie* and they watched some normal teenage series. (ChI)

The Polish teachers treated Barbara individually and with a great deal of understanding, which was emphasised by her parents. There were times when assessments were adapted to her capabilities as a child with migration experience. Barbara was given time to start feeling comfortable in a Polish school. Despite the good reception, however, she noticed a difference between her Polish teachers' approach to the student and that of her German teachers, which indicated a slightly different school culture. Having attended a German school, she expected a more partner-like and more friendly attitude from the Polish teachers:

> In Germany, there was this belief that this teacher-educator is like a friend, like a parent. I thought it's similar in Poland at school, but it turned out it wasn't. It didn't turn out badly, but still, it's something different from the Polish school… (ChI)

Despite this, in the words of her mother, Barbara "quickly resumed normal learning and the teachers recognised her potential and treated her as an individual" (MPI). Thanks to her work at home, she had no problem studying the learning content. Her only difficulty in the first few months after her return was the English lessons. She did not have much English in Germany, whereas in Poland students start learning this language in the first grade.

As far as the Polish language is concerned, the girl had no major difficulties upon her return. She mastered handwriting, which is often a major challenge for early childhood education abroad, through homework. In addition, her German school also placed great importance on this skill. She only needed to work on specialised vocabulary, covering subject areas that she had not encountered during her stay in Germany.

The migration experience allowed Barbara to improve her linguistic competence; it opened her up to language education in general and helped her function in a multicultural environment. Her father also talked about encountering a different mentality and culture, emphasising the importance of such experience in the labour market:

> Above all, it was about opening up to a different mentality, a different way of being, a different order, and about learning, above all, the language so that my daughter would be able to find her way one day in a working environment where she would be in contact with different languages. (MPI)

Conclusion

The discussed case of return migration of Barbara and her family confirms the findings from literature cited in the first part of this article. The direction of migration, the character of education in Germany, and parental support proved to be key factors determining her migration experience and (re)adaptation process in the Polish school.

Barbara's example shows the challenges faced by students who enter the education system in another country and then return to school in their country of origin. The differences between education in Germany and Poland made the transition more difficult. The German school focused on practice and the individual needs of the student, including the child with migration experience, and was a developmental and supportive environment. The parents, especially the mother, ensured the continuity of Barbara's education in line with the key topics of Polish curriculum; they also ensured that she maintained contact with Poland and her Polish peers. At the same time, they sought to develop her bilingualism. The support was made possible by the parents' pedagogical awareness, their knowledge and competence and their time resources, considering the fact that Barbara was an only child and her mother did not take up employment in Germany.

On her return, Barbara benefitted from the approach of her Polish teachers, who treated her as an individual and gave her time to adjust to the Polish school environment and catch up on what she did not know. Although she encountered difficult situations and incomprehension from her peers, at the same time she received help from her teachers, who quickly recognised her potential. Migration does not seem to have limited her educational opportunities; it was quite the opposite. Although Barbara did not develop any particular competence in German later on, learning the language helped her to take on the challenge of learning other languages and opened her up to other cultures and the possibility of migrating in the future if necessary.

The case of Barbara and her family may be treated as a model one when it comes to preparing for the school (re)adaptation process and the return of a child from a remigrant family to a Polish school. Several key factors determined the success: the support of the child's parents, the maintenance of contacts with Poland, speaking Polish and meeting Poles during her stay abroad, and the teachers' individual approach to the girl after her return to the Polish school. Other factors at play included the age of the child at the time of departure for Germany and return home, and the period of stay abroad, which was not very long. The stage of middle childhood education, which Barbara spent partly in Germany and had to make up for in the course of her further education in Poland, is of an introductory nature. At that initial stage, specialised subject vocabulary, which can impede the child's transition between systems, is still very limited.

By focusing on an individual case study, this article offers a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted factors facilitating successful adaptation of children following return migration. The case of Barbara exemplifies how various interconnected factors contribute to effective reintegration into the Polish education system. Maintaining regular contact with relatives and friends in the home country – including peers from the child's previous school – helped preserve a sense of continuity and belonging. Additionally, both psychological and educational preparations prior to the return

eased her transition into the Polish school environment. Her young age and the timing of the return – coinciding with the conclusion of one educational stage in Germany and the commencement of another in Poland – also played a significant role in facilitating adaptation.

What played a pivotal role in Barbara's successful reintegration into the Polish education system was the proactive and sustained involvement of her parents, particularly her mother. Their pedagogical and linguistic awareness, coupled with a strong commitment to their daughter's education, enabled them to provide her with a comprehensive support throughout the adaptation process. Notably, the mother's decision not to take up employment during their stay abroad allowed her to dedicate substantial time and resources to facilitating Barbara's adjustment to the new environment and to preparing her for the return to Poland. The supportive attitude of teachers in the receiving school, coupled with individualised educational approaches, further facilitated Barbara's adjustment. An individualised approach to education enabled her to bridge language gaps and curricular differences, while also nurturing skills acquired during the migration period.

It is important to recognise that despite thorough preparation, return migration remains a multifaceted challenge for both children and their families. The experience of migration and return constitutes a critical life event, influencing subsequent personal, educational and professional decisions of the family members. It is evident that further research is required in this area.

Bibliography

Agarwala, A. (2020). *Das Integrationsexperiment: Flüchtlinge an der Schule – eine Bilanz nach fünf Jahren*. Dudenverlag.

Błaszkowska, H. (2000). Soziopragmatische Unterschiede in der polnisch-deutschen Kommunikation. *Studia Germanica Posnaniensia*, *26*, 16–27.

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2019). *Integrating students from migrant backgrounds into schools in Europe: National policies and measures: Eurydice report*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Grosa, D. (2022). The return migration of children: (Re)integration is not always plain sailing. In R. King & K. Kuschminder (Eds.), *Handbook of return migration* (pp. 241–254). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839100055.00027

Grosa, D., & King, R. (2023). The challenges of educational reintegration and the psychosocial wellbeing of returnee children: Evidence from Latvia. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *24*(Suppl.2), 407–426. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-022-00960-3

Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H., Grzymała-Moszczyńska, J., Durlik, J., & Szydłowska, P. (2015). *(Nie)łatwe powroty do domu? Funkcjonowanie dzieci i młodzieży powracających z emigracji*. Fundacja Centrum im. prof. Bronisława Geremka.

Helbig-Mischewski, B. (2014). Polacy i Niemcy: Stereotypy i uprzedzenia czy różnice kulturowe? In P. Wolski (Ed.), *Doświadczenie (po)granicza: Polsko-niemieckie Pomorze w historii, literaturze, kulturze* (pp. 17–24). Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organisations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Iglicka, K. (2013). Powroty Polaków po 2024 roku: W pętli pułapki migracji. *Zeszyty Naukowe PUNO: Seria trzecia*, *2013*(1), 33–49.

Jeran, A., Nowosielski, M., & Nowak, W. (2019). *Migranci z Polski w Niemczech – aspekty kulturowe: Raport z badań*. Ośrodek Badań nad Migracjami Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30937.13929

Klemeshev, A. P., Korneevets, V. S., Palmowski, T., Studzieniecki, T., & Fedorov, G. M. (2017). Approaches to the definition of the Baltic Sea region. *Baltic Region*, *9*(4), 4–20. https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2017-4-1

Nowicka, E. (2009). Introduction: The study of return migrations. In E. Nowicka & H. Firouzbakhch (Eds.), *Homecoming: An anthropology of return migrations* (pp. 9–20). Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos.

Nowosad, I. (2012). Szkolnictwo w Niemczech wobec tradycji i potrzeby zmiany. *Dialogi o Kulturze i Edukacji*, *1*(1), 141–163.

Nowosielski, M. (2019). Dynamika migracji z Polski do Niemiec i charakterystyka polskiej zbiorowości. *Studia BAS*, *2019*(4(60)), 75–100. https://doi.org/10.31268/StudiaBAS.2019.31

Sari, D. R., & Sassi, K. (2024). Education system in Germany. *Edumaspul – Journal of Education*, *8*(2), 3135–3146. https://doi.org/10.33487/edumaspul.v8i2.8412

Seretny, A. (2024). *Polszczyzna jako język szkolnej edukacji w perspektywie glottodydaktycznej*. Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas.

Stankiewicz, K. (2019). Międzykulturowe otwarcie szkoły jako odpowiedź na potrzeby ucznia z doświadczeniem migracyjnym: Na przykładzie migracji powrotnych. *Kultura i Edukacja*, *2019*(1(123)), 248–262. https://czasopisma.marszalek.com.pl/uploads/periodicals/kie/123/kie12315.pdf

Stankiewicz, K., & Żurek, A. (2014). *Ukryty program nauczania polskiego i niemieckiego jako języków obcych: Konteksty kulturowe*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Leksem.

Stankiewicz, K., & Żurek, A. (2021). Wychowanie dwujęzyczne w rodzinie polonijnej w Niemczech: Perspektywa drugiego pokolenia emigrantów. *Roczniki Teologiczne*, *68*(10), 160–175. https://doi.org/10.18290/rt.216810.9

Stankiewicz, K., & Żurek, A. (2022). Edukacja dzieci uchodźczych w Polsce. *Infos: Zagadnienia Społeczno-Gospodarcze*, *2022*(5), 1–4. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1038477

Stankiewicz, K., & Żurek, A. (2023). Children of return migrants in a Polish school: Linguistic and (inter)cultural challenges. *Polish Journal of Educational Studies*, *75*(1), 93–106. https://doi.org/10.2478/poljes-2023-0009

Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis). (2025). *Statistischer Bericht – Mikrozensus – Bevölkerung nach Einwanderungsgeschichte – Erstergebnisse 2024*. https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/

Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/statistischer-bericht-einwanderungsgeschichte-erst-5122126247005.html

Szmytkowska, M., & Studzińska, D. (2022). Determinanty i zróżnicowanie aktywności społeczno-kulturowej polskich organizacji w Niemczech na przykładzie Berlina i Hamburga. *Przegląd Geograficzny*, *94*(2), 235–252. https://doi.org/10.7163/PrzG.2022.2.4

Szymczak, A., & Strzemieczna, E. (Eds.). (2024). *Porównanie systemów edukacyjnych państw OECD ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sposobu konstruowania podstaw programowych: Profil absolwenta*. Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.

Terhart, H., Massumi, M., & von Dewitz, N. (2017). Aktuelle Zuwanderung – Wege der Schulentwicklung in der Migrationsgesellschaft. *Die Deutsche Schule*, *109*(3), 236–247. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:25882

Thomas, A., & Utler, A. (2013). Kultur, Kulturdimensionen und Kulturstandards. In P. Genkova, T. Ringeisen, & F. Leong (Eds.), *Handbuch Stress und Kultur* (pp. 41–58). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93449-5_2

White, A. (2014). Double return migration: Failed returns to Poland leading to settlement abroad and new transnational strategies. *International Migration*, *52*(6), 72–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12138

Żurek, A., & Stankiewicz, K. (2025). On the way to integration? The education of children with diverse migration experiences in Polish schools. *Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education*, *14*(1(27)), 221–240. https://doi.org/10.35765/mjse.2025.1427.10

From Poland to Germany and Back: Return Migration in the Context of Education – A Case Study

Abstract

The geographical proximity of the countries of the Baltic Sea region fosters numerous linguistic and cultural contacts between their inhabitants. In particular, Germany is a popular migration destination for Poles, but it is also from there that Polish migrants often return to Poland, facing many challenges as a result. These challenges include, among other things, the education of the youngest generation. This article aims to present return migration from Germany to Poland in the context of the child's education from the perspective of the parents and the student herself. The study is based on in-depth interviews with the parents and the child. The selected case, exemplary in nature, presents successful (re)adaptation in a Polish school and the Polish environment.

Keywords: return migration; family; early childhood education; bilingualism; identity

Z Polski do Niemiec i z powrotem. Migracje powrotne w kontekście edukacji – studium przypadku

Streszczenie

Bliskość geograficzna krajów regionu Morza Bałtyckiego sprzyja licznym kontaktom językowym i kulturowym między ich mieszkańcami. Niemcy są popularnym kierunkiem migracji Polaków, ale również właśnie stamtąd polscy migranci często powracają do Polski, mierząc się z wieloma wyzwaniami z tym związanymi. Dotyczą one m.in. edukacji najmłodszego pokolenia. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie migracji powrotnej z Niemiec do Polski w kontekście edukacji dziecka z perspektywy rodziców i samej uczennicy. Studium zostało opracowane na podstawie wywiadów pogłębionych z rodzicami i dzieckiem. Wybrany przypadek, o charakterze przykładowym, przedstawia udaną (re)adaptację w polskiej szkole i polskim środowisku.

Słowa kluczowe: migracja powrotna; rodzina; edukacja wczesnoszkolna; dwujęzyczność; tożsamość

Dr Katarzyna Stankiewicz, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Family Studies, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland. She holds a PhD in the humanities, with specialisation in pedagogy, and a master's degree in pedagogy and Polish philology, with training in teaching Polish as a foreign language. She has experience of working in a Polish school in Germany and a primary school in Poland with Ukrainian children, as well as training teachers. She is the author or co-author of over forty academic publications, including a monograph, research reports and teaching materials. Her research interests include intercultural education, the education of children with migration experience, and the cultural aspects of language teaching. She is currently conducting a research project on the school adaptation of students from return migrant families, funded by the National Science Centre, Poland.

Bibliography (selected): (with A. Żurek), *Ukryty program nauczania polskiego i niemieckiego jako języków obcych* [The hidden curriculum of Polish and German as foreign languages], Łask 2014; Międzykulturowe otwarcie szkoły jako odpowiedź na potrzeby ucznia z doświadczeniem migracyjnym. Na przykładzie migracji powrotnych [Intercultural opening of the school as a response to the needs of the student with migration experience: On the example of return migration], *Kultura i Edukacja* 1(123), Toruń 2019, 248–262; (with A. Żurek), Educational needs of children with migration experience in terms of language development at their early childhood

stage: Theoretical assumptions and state of research, *Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji* 59(2), Gdańsk 2023, 20–32; Ideas of intercultural education in response to the challenges of a culturally diverse school: The context of patriotic and civic education, in: M. Gruchola & R. Zieliński (eds.), *Spectrum of national identity attitudes at school*, London 2024, 79–92.

Dr hab. Anna Żurek, Associate Professor at the Institute of Polish Studies, University of Wrocław, Poland; PhD – 2005, University of Wrocław; habilitation in humanities, linguistics – 2019, Institute of Polish Studies, University of Wrocław; author of two books and over fifty scholarly articles; co-author of one book and two reports; editor or co-editor of four academic monographs and thirteen volumes of teaching materials for learning Polish as a foreign and second language. Her research interests include the theory of language acquisition, bilingualism, language etiquette, methodology of teaching Polish as a foreign and heritage language, intercultural communication and education of children with migration experience (including refugee experience).

Bibliography (selected): *Grzeczność językowa w polszczyźnie cudzoziemców. Wybrane zagadnienia* [Linguistic politeness in the Polish language spoken by foreigners: Selected issues], Łask 2008; (with K. Stankiewicz), *Ukryty program nauczania polskiego i niemieckiego jako języków obcych* [The hidden curriculum of Polish and German as foreign languages], Łask 2014; *Strategie komunikacyjne osób dwujęzycznych. Na przykładzie polszczyzny odziedziczonej w Niemczech* [Communication strategies of bilinguals: On the example of Polish as a heritage language in Germany], Kraków (Cracow) 2018; *Z badań nad polszczyzną Ukraińców mieszkających w Polsce. W kierunku bilingwizmu ukraińsko-polskiego* [From the research on the Polish language of Ukrainians living in Poland: Towards Ukrainian-Polish bilingualism], in: A. Żurek (ed.), *Wielojęzyczność jako wyzwanie społeczne, kulturowe i edukacyjne* [Multilingualism as a social, cultural and educational challenge], Kraków (Cracow) 2023.

Correspondence: Katarzyna Stankiewicz, Faculty of Family Studies, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: katarzyna.stankiewicz@uksw.edu.pl; Anna Żurek, Institute of Polish Studies, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland, e-mail: anna.zurek@uwr.edu.pl

Support of the work: This publication is a result of the research project no. UMO-2020/39/D/HS6/00162, financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

Authors' contribution: K. Stankiewicz is responsible for the concept of the study and data analysis. A. Żurek is responsible for data collection. Both authors participated in the literature review and drafting the manuscript.

Competing interests: The authors state that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

Publication history: Received: 2025-01-30; Accepted: 2025-06-25; Published: 2025-12-31