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# Norwegian Schooling in the Eyes of Polish Parents: From Contestations to Embracing the System

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*The issue of the educational system remains one of the crucial areas for the discussions pertaining to migrants' integration and contemporary multicultural societies. Ever since the inception of compulsory schooling, children and youth have partaken in largely state-governed socialisation in schools, which provide not only knowledge and qualifications, but are also responsible for transferring the culture and values of a given society. Under this premise, the schooling system largely determines opportunities available to migrant children. This paper seeks to address the questions about the pathways to youth Polish migrant integration, belonging and achievement (or a lack thereof) visible in the context of the Norwegian school system. The paper draws on 30 interviews conducted in 2014 with Polish parents raising children abroad, and concentrates on the features of Norwegian school as seen through the eyes of Polish parents. Our findings show that the educational contexts of both sending and receiving societies are of paramount importance for the understanding of family and parenting practices related to children's schooling. In addition, we showcase the significance of Norwegian schools for children's integration, illuminate the tensions in parental narratives and put the debates in the context of a more detailed analysis of the relations between school and home environments of migrant children. The paper relies on parental narratives in an attempt to trace and reflect the broader meanings of children's education among Poles living abroad.*

*Keywords: migrant children; migrant students; school system; Polish families in Norway*

## Introduction

The migrants who either leave their countries of origin as mothers and fathers or become parents after moving abroad eventually need to make decisions about their children's schooling. The moment of entering a foreign educational system by migrants' children can very much be seen as the foretold evidence of settlement choices – a decision to stay relatively permanently (or alternatively – a cause for return). From this point onwards, parents must plan long term and take into account the interests of their children finishing certain stages of education (grade, school level).

At the other end of the spectrum, the countries that are attractive to migrants sooner or later have to develop educational policies that include pupils with migrant backgrounds within their ambit. The choices made on

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macro and mezzo levels may have varied impacts on different institutions, which may then either conform to the suggested framework for supporting migrant children, or, as is the case with Norway, establish (or choose not to implement) its own need-based solutions locally. At any rate, the school is a linchpin, a predicate of integration-related successes and failures in the destination society.

For a child with migratory background, starting a new school will occupy a central location in the nexus of multiple and often conflicting interests of adults (parents, teachers, school personnel, policy makers, relatives / kin members) and institutions (schools, ministries), conceivably located across the borders, and cultural logics of two or more nation-states. A situation of a particular child will be a result of societal pressures in the receiving society, family setting and family practices germane to education, as well as – in the later years – child's individual choices.

In this context, this article seeks to address questions about the pathways to youth migrant integration, belonging and achievement (or a lack thereof) visible in the school system context. Due to the ample scope of the topic, we limit our analysis to the school system and the relations between parents and school, although other areas, such as peer and hobby groups, extracurricular activities, diaspora participation / strategies for maintaining heritage and shaping Polishness, as well as forms of leisure are equally important for examining processes of children's integration. In this paper, we focus on questions pertinent to how mothers and fathers frame the role of children's education in their migration and how parents perceive the school in the destination society, with the narratives here being illustrative specifically of the Norwegian case. The main aim is to show the general opinions that Polish parents have about the Norwegian education system, while also seeking to showcase the contradictions in these opinions as suggested by the article's title. These contradictions are embedded, more specifically, in the interplay between praise and doubts about schools in the destination country, as well as the possible problems stemming from the fact of being an immigrant in Norway. The main argument we put forward in the article is that narrative evidence clearly shows the titular tendencies among the respondents, who often talk about the Norwegian schooling of their children in a manner full of contradictions – partly embracing and otherwise contesting the foreign system. The analysis proceeds in a two-fold manner. First, we outline the types of parental generalisations about schooling, both those negative (e.g. poor curriculum) and those positive (e.g. focus on health, diversity, laid-back approach), seeing them as embedded in the existing educational model described in the literature section. Secondly, we present the particular and non-systemic factors relevant to the educational pathways of success and dissatisfaction for Polish migrant children abroad (individually sought and implemented solutions, chance encounters, etc.).

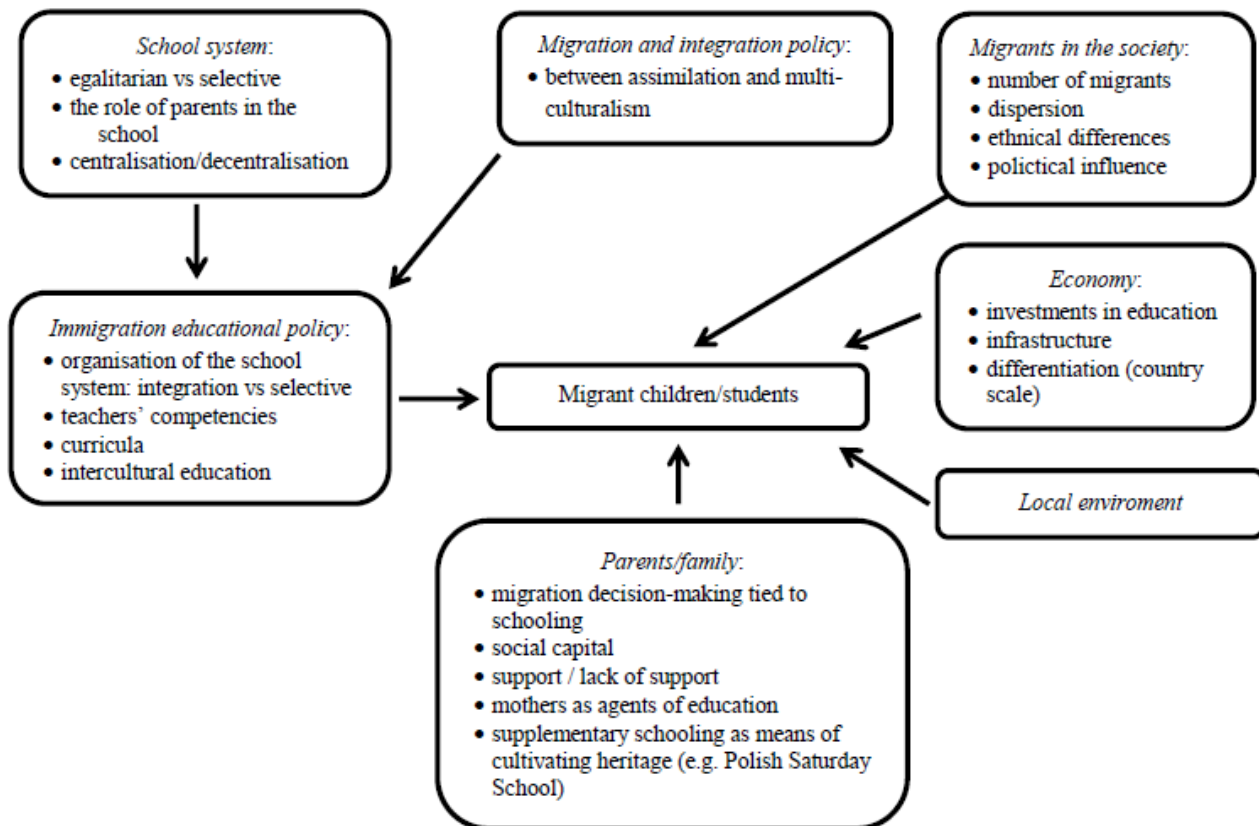
### **Politics, integration and values: migrants and the education system**

The leading criterion for looking at children's school situation following migration is the immigration policy, especially the views on integration dominant in their destination country. Together with other pertinent factors, the intersecting influences are presented in Figure 1 below.

To reiterate, a conceptualisation of cultural integration relies heavily on the attitude of the receiving country towards immigration, as well as the concepts of citizenship and framing of nationality, which govern societies. Across the globe, the contingent solutions seem to ensue from differing situations and historical inceptions of the more visible influxes of migrants. They are stretched on a continuum ranging from implementations closer to assimilation (e.g. in France; Schulte 2001; Freudweiler 2003; Morokvasic and Catarino 2006), to middle-ground approaches (e.g. in Germany, where the initial attempts at ignoring the large numbers of incoming populations shifted towards integration focus; Puskeppelit and Krüger-Potratz 1999; Neumann 2006; Steffens 2006), to multifarious variants of multiculturalism (e.g. in the United Kingdom, Sweden; see Schulte 2001; Freudweiler

2003; Beyersdörfer 2005; Anthias, Cedeberg and Raluca Torre 2006; Cedeberg and Anthias 2006; Ślusarczyk 2008; see also: Adams and Kirova 2006).

**Figure 1. Children with migrant origin in the schooling system**



Source: Ślusarczyk, Nikielska-Sekuła (2014): 178.

The Norwegian school system as an environment is believed to be capable of facilitating the blending in with the country's multicultural society, as well as fostering knowledge acquisition and focus on professional qualifications recognised in the receiving society (Taguma, Shewbridge, Huttova and Hoffman 2009; OECD 2010). A portentous influx of immigrants into Norway began after the Second World War and reached its high point during the 1960s. At the beginning of 2015, the number of immigrants totalled 669 400 (SSB 2015), while 135 600 people were born into migrant families. It is estimated that as many as 222 nationalities and ethnicities are represented in Norway, and the Polish population is currently the largest immigrant group, totalling 91 000, or 14 percent of all immigrants in Norway (SSB 2015). Notably, the Polish discourse and research on the character of migration outflows and their influence on children seems to include two tracks. One is highly critical and foregrounds an assumption that mobility is hectic, spontaneous, non-strategic and overall has a negative impact on children and their education (e.g. Kawecki, Kwatera, Majerek and Trusz 2012). At the same time, the second empirically-grounded research strand suggests that migratory decisions made by Poles, especially those with families, are very much organised and prepared; migrants carefully choose when to move abroad as they search the conditions that are possibly most beneficial for their offspring and their education (see e.g. White 2010; Pustułka 2013; Ryan and Sales 2013).

Linking the country-case with earlier description of systemic approaches, the Norwegian system can be classified as close to multiculturalism, although it is not named as the official integration policy. The discourse of diversity and multiculturalism first emerged in Norway around the 1970s as an alternative to assimilation at a time when the society was still relatively homogenous. In 1980 the assimilation policies were officially rejected, and, simultaneously, it was stressed that the receiving state bears as much responsibility for maintaining the unique national cultures of the incoming populations as the migrants themselves (Hagelund 2002: 406–407). As a result, the Norwegian immigration policy is described as ‘de facto multiculturalism’<sup>1</sup> by some scholars (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007: 197–198).

To complete the discussion of the Norwegian immigration policy, let us highlight some features of the local education system (see e.g. Marlow-Ferguson and Lopez 2002; Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart 2004; Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006). In Norway, children aged 0 to 5 can attend early years education provided by kindergartens (Kamerman 2000), although this implies paid care. Elementary level education (*grunnskole*) is compulsory and free for children between the ages of 6 and 15. This stage is split into two levels: primary school for children aged 6 to 12 (*barneskole*), and middle school (*ungdomskole*) for youth in the 13 to 15 age bracket. The afterschool programme / additional care (SFO) is available for 6 to 9-year-olds both before and after classes. The programme is voluntary and participation costs are covered by parents (*egenandel*). After completing this step, children continue their education in the state-funded (obligatory) 3-year high school (*videregående skole*), which opens the doors to university (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2007).

The stages of Polish compulsory education arranged according to children’s age are quite similar, although it was only recently that the school starting age has been reduced from 7 to 6 years in a political decision that has since been reversed. This macro-similarity of levels may be deceptive to parents, who could perhaps assume a smooth educational transition upon migration and/or return. In fact, the deep-lying differences between approaches to schooling, grading, skills and curricular focuses are quite stark (*Education and Migration Strategies...* 2008; Ślusarczyk and Nikielska-Sekuła 2014; Muchacka 2015). Besides the formal conditions, for instance a mechanism of repeating a grade and its connotations in Poland, the assumptions within the educational framework are fundamentally different. Despite several consecutive reforms, Polish schools are still dominated by academic approaches and impose curricula that are often evaluated as overloaded with lessons using largely lecturing-based didactic methods. Academic attainment and grades are strongly correlated with socio-economic status of families. While individual approach and teaching agency are declared, they are difficult to acquire because local councils seek to reduce educational costs and so there are now 30 or more pupils in one class (Ślusarczyk 2010; Gulczyńska and Wiśniewska-Kin 2013).

A holistic immigration policy and strategies of integration impact the shape of educational policy, including the degree and type of provisions made for children with migratory backgrounds. Broadly speaking, two concepts of separation- and integration-centred models can be discerned (Todorovska-Sokolovska 2010). Under the first of the two approaches, children of migrants attend separate (transitory) divisions and classes for a certain period. They are expected to use that time and training to master the local language to the degree allowing them to actively participate in tasks carried out in the regular classroom (EIW 2007). The integrational model assumes that children of migrants partake in the obligatory classes and follow the same rules as the local children. In addition, they receive help in the form of supplementary language modules or assistance from (bilingual) assistant teachers (Szelewa 2010; Todorovska-Sokolovska 2010; Ślusarczyk and Nikielska-Sekuła 2014). Both these solutions are actually found in the Norwegian schooling system with the choice over their selection left at the discretion of the commune. Furthermore, the Norwegian state infrastructure strives to welcome children into the educational institutions as early as possible, seeing the nursery and the kindergarten as crucial tools of socialisation and integration (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2007: 23, see

also Sammons 2013 and Miller, Votruba-Drzal and Levine Coley 2013 for broader context). For several years now, a strategic plan has been in place that is grounded in the equality of participation in the educational system for students from linguistic minorities.<sup>2</sup> Apart from aid focused on increasing children's competency in Norwegian and their inclusion in the peer groups and school community, some steps are taken to foster opportunities for cultivating aspects of children's home/ethnic/parental/origin culture at school (EIW 2006).

In practice, when children at the school age do not know the Norwegian language, they receive teaching help. One of the common solutions is to open integrational divisions at schools. The so called welcoming divisions – *innføringsgrupper* – are located within schools and tasked with introducing both the language and the Norwegian culture and social norms.<sup>3</sup> At times, these divisions are available for more than one age group or beyond the introductory level.<sup>4</sup> Another possibility, which sometimes functions as a continuation of the initial study period in the special class, is for the child to be assigned a bilingual teacher assistant, fluent in both Norwegian and the child's mother tongue. Here the support is delivered once or several times a week (depending on the commune) and takes the form of meetings and ongoing help with schoolwork, as well as translating homework assignments, in-class tests and their results, and other measures of grading the child's achievements. Evidently, integration-focused strategy and the selection of educational model cannot be functional without appropriate qualifications and engagement on the part of teachers, teacher assistants and other teaching personnel. The same requirement applies to the availability and superior quality of intercultural curricula and relevant changes to the actual teaching methods and the philosophy of teaching.<sup>5</sup>

School achievement levels (a combination of grades/attainment and integration) of the foreign pupils can also be affected by the underlying macrostructures, such as the schemata behind the educational system, the level of egalitarianism, and the pre-set thresholds of selection. The Norwegian schooling is generally assessed as 'inclusive' in this realm (Flem and Keller 2000; Taguma *et al.* 2009; OECD 2010).<sup>6</sup> Its characteristic features such as a unified and clear structure and curriculum outlines, as well as a nation-wide standardised organisation of teachers' qualifications, make the system relatively ready to promote integration and receptive to the needs of migrant pupils.

On the one hand, the clearly pronounced goal of this policy is to promote egalitarianism and equality and secure equal access to education, regardless of children's social status, cultural origin, place of residence, gender and needs (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2007). On the other hand, the decentralisation of the system results in slightly unfair dependency on the communes: children will receive support as long as the commune has the infrastructure, political will and financial resources to provide it.

An analysis of the policy and organisation of the school system does not exhaust the topic under discussion. As it was already suggested at the beginning of this paper, an equally vital aspect is the component of the community and home environment, which mark the different intersecting axes of the child's situation. Operating in the space where public (institutional) and private (familial) spaces meet, children and their parents navigate the often unfamiliar waters of their new locality. This is due to the fact that the school not only transmits knowledge and teaches certain skills, but also promotes and imprints ideologies, norms and values, which may openly contradict or subliminally contest the ones conveyed at home and by family members (Freudweiler 2003: 171; Möbius 2003: 588). Therefore, a structural analysis of the school success/failure predictors should be paired with the investigation of family practices as well as the type, form and level of support (or its lack) that the children receive in their family setting. Another aspect that must not be overlooked is the importance of *habitus* understood in the Bourdieusian sense as the complex set of tendencies, attitudes and dispositions immanent to individuals and introduced into the sphere of human habits (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 9); *habitus* is of pivotal importance for the attitudes to school and studying, as well as the chance of academic success. Migration scholarship particularly underscores the role of mothers, who operate as *capital*

*brokers*, making viable ‘a crucial link for maintaining, enhancing or destabilising the intergenerational reproduction, accumulation and transmission of cultural capital within family strategies’ (Erel 2012: 466). In sum, children’s scholarly success depends to a large extent on their parents’ views of education, aspirations, plans, and support.

Of similar importance is parental response to the requests, norms and demands that school requires them to confront and either conform to or reject. Here one finds the issue of how much significance is assigned to the cooperation on the school–home front and the active engagement of parents in school life. Among migrants, the perception of the norm might be skewed, while the language difficulties may further hinder parents’ performance in the eyes of the school.

Three types of assistive measures found across Europe are written information booklets in the respective mother tongues of the migrants, employment of interpreter’s services, and using special personnel delegated to migrant support (EACEA 2009). Relying on hiring and utilising assistants is believed to be the best option, as it fosters maintaining activity and subjectivity of migrant pupils as well as their parents. This is definitely favourable for the student populations with the representation of asylum seekers’ children, who are often said to have experienced trauma, but is also seen as the swiftest way to deal with problems with the chance of parental engagement in school matters of their children *via* an appropriate proxy (an adult without stake in the matter rather than their child, for instance).

In the Norwegian system, where high levels of parental participation in education are prioritised and seen as one of the main predictors of the child’s success, the latter solution is unsurprisingly preferred. The problem arises, however, when parents are unprepared to benefit from the support offered to them. Several reasons contribute to such situation and the first issue might stem from the simple inner-differentiation within migrant communities – both intra- and inter-ethnically (stratifications, class). Bourdieu’s habitus explains social and material features of life-styles and attitudes to scholarly and alternative means of education. Secondly, some migrants assume that the separation between the institutions of school and family that they were familiar with in their country of origin is organised in the same manner in the destination society. This false conviction is of paramount significance for Polish migrant parents in Norway, as the Poles were said to constitute a rather *latent* group (Olson 1965) as far as the landscape of social participation is concerned. On the macro-scale, Poles seem to benefit little from the available options of becoming engaged in schools and influencing their actions. Their organisational efforts are concentrated on the *ad-hoc* defence of interests, while their perception of the above mentioned institutional capabilities remains unchanged: they still see them as fake and maintained for the sole purpose of legitimisation of the decisions made by school authorities and administrative bodies within the education system (Ślusarczyk 2010; Gulczyńska and Wiśniewska-Kin 2013; Muchacka 2015).

To conclude, the situation experienced by Polish parents in Norway at the time when their children enter the education system is marked by a degree of uneasiness, as they are not culturally prepared or equipped for tackling the systemic demands and understanding the local practices. The results section will examine how they come to terms with this issue, while it also showcases the resultant narrative tension. The inquiry seeks to demonstrate how it is possible for parents to be highly critical of the Norwegian system on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to be absolutely delighted with some of the components and practices offered by the schools they encounter in their destination country.

## Methodology

The empirical basis for the study was the data collected under the *Migrant Families in Norway: Structure of Power Relations and Negotiating Values and Norms in Transnational Families* study within the Transfam

project *Doing Family in Transnational Context. Demographic Choices, Welfare Adaptations, School Integration and Every-Day Life of Polish Families Living in Polish–Norwegian Transnationality*.<sup>7</sup> The methodological approach was that of a small-scale qualitative in-depth inquiry and a combination of biographical and narrative interviewing techniques was used for data collection, yielding a dataset of 30 interviews. The respondent pool contains interviews (cases) with 40 members of 30 households, which cover both individual mothers (18) and fathers (2), as well as migrant parenting couples interviewed together (10). The aggregated characteristics of the respondents show the average age of 37.5 years within the 29–54 age range. The interviewees are parents to 57 children and the number of children per family is 1.9 (the participating families had between 1 and 5 children).<sup>8</sup> The average age of the child falls into the early school years at just below 9 years. A more detailed breakdown of children's ages is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Respondents' children by age, N = 57**

Age group	Number of children
over 18	5
teenagers (13–18)	5
pre-teens (10–12)	11
early school years (6–9)	23
preschool (3–5)	7
under 3	6

The respondents and their children reside in the Norwegian capital and its surrounding suburban areas, as well as slightly more remote, rural places (up to 200 km away from Oslo), where they live largely middle-class lives, while representing a vast array of occupational statuses and educational attainment backgrounds.

The research design relied on the pragmatic premise of acquiring biographical narratives that focus on specific topics and events (Wengraf 2001), namely family and mobility. A rigorous data analysis process entailed a systematic approach to the use of analytical grids prepared immediately after the interviews and, most importantly, the meticulously transcribed interviews subjected to open-coding and textual organisation. In this paper, the focus is primarily on the narratives solicited through questions on the opinions that the respondent(s) had in connection with their child's or children's experiences at different levels of education (preschool, primary school, middle school, and so on). Follow-up probing on how the respondents compared Polish schooling (as remembered by the parent and/or experienced by children prior to leaving the country) to the Norwegian system and the forms of communication and engagement with local educational institutions abroad were also analysed and used for illustration in this article. The analysed material yielded a data matrix with a sufficient degree of depth, robustness and saturation.

### **'So much help but so little Mathematics!' – school evaluations and tensions in the interviews with parents**

To begin with, the findings presented here have a somewhat bilateral track of macro- and institutional-level themes on the one hand, and a more individualistically oriented focus on particular practices and unique biographic accounts, on the other hand.

In terms of the former, the narratives support earlier data collected for Polish parents and children on the institutional role of school. The results continue the line of argumentation which sees schooling as vital for the wider migration decision-making process and a primary space of socialisation in the destination country (e.g.

Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2008; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; White 2010; Pustulka 2013; Ryan and Sales 2013). This is clear from statements made by the interviewed parents, for instance:

*I always explain that the fact we decided to come to Norway with our son [is] because he was still very young. Because I think that had he been 8 or 9 years old and had started a stable education in Poland, then we would not have made this decision. We personally believe that it would be an effort for him, then, it could do him some kind of harm. (...) I think he would still be able to make it in terms of picking up the language if he was 8 or 9 but I also think that it was different for him coming here at 3, starting kindergarten, learning two languages at once (Marek, 34, 2: 2006, 2012).<sup>9</sup>*

This behaviour, which is very common among the respondents, suggests an alternative track to the earlier conceptualisations of Polish mobility as hectic, spontaneous, precipitant and involving overly optimistic convictions about the unproblematic language acquisition and fast adaptation that children would experience if migrating at an early age. Looking at the post-migration context, this attitude of child-centrality understood through the lens of educational success persists. Further, it is a novel finding that children's schooling might even be prioritised over parents' employment and career ambitions, much like in other similarly positioned global locations (e.g. Park and Abelmann 2004; Erel 2012). Talking about unwelcome changes in her husband's workplace, Kamila said:

*The topic of searching work [and moving] elsewhere keeps coming back like a boomerang. And I say to my husband: 'Good Lord, [we've had] this one really big move, let the children at least finish the schools, they can't be moved about like that. They are in the middle of their primary school!' So even though our daughter has recently changed schools – she did not like the Norwegian one and, just days ago, in January, she started a private school (...) it's in English, more demanding. (...) At any rate, she's just changed schools, so at this time there is no way we can move. Unfortunately, he [Kamila's husband] has to forget his ambitions for now (Kamila, 46, 2: 2003, 2006).*

To reiterate, when they consider the timing of their move abroad, parents pay as much attention to their children's education (hoping to ensure they have a smooth educational transition abroad) as they do to purely economic considerations (White 2010; D'Angelo and Ryan 2011; Praszalowicz, Irek, Małek, Napierała, Pustulka and Pyłat 2013; Pustulka 2013; Ryan and Sales 2013). From this it follows that parents no longer have the illusion that children can succeed in spite of living in a state of flux and ponder the impossibility of return from the educational setting's perspective:

*If we wanted to go back now, we think it would be quite difficult [with our daughter] who goes to the 3rd grade here. We don't know what it looks like there but knowing the Polish school from experience, [knowing] the teachers and the Polish system, we would expect many difficulties, because of the curricular differences, I think we would hit the wall (Daria, 37, Adam, 38, 2: 2005, 2009).*

Moving to look at the details, all biographies of school-aged children's parents, without an exception, contained elaborate descriptions and evaluations of the Norwegian education system. The opinions were usually formed based on reference to the parents' own schooling experiences back in Poland, as well as early education of children prior to migration whenever applicable. Interestingly, we found that many parents tried to stay up to date with the developments of the Polish school and mentioned their kin members with children of similar age, such as cousins, nieces or nephews, as well as friends' kids. Having analysed the entirety of responses,



one comes to the conclusion that a whole spectrum of evaluations – from highly enthusiastic to profoundly negative – can be found in the stories of Polish parents in Norway. Another notable finding is that factors such as the length of stay abroad, having a foreign/Norwegian partner, as well as the social class and type of education are significant for how parents formulate their understandings, which mirrors some previous research results (e.g. Ryan *et al.* 2008; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Erel 2012; Pustułka 2013). The parents established meanings using heuristics, random experiences, information (of varied quality) acquired from other Poles, research, or even one's own professional record in educational sector abroad, since as many as seven female respondents had a history of employment in teaching-related positions.

As mentioned above, the parents first and foremost engage in a comparative evaluation of the two distinct and often incompatible educational systems of Poland and Norway (see e.g. Hörner, Döbert, Kopp and von Mitter 2007). The Poland's education system continues to be based on achievement and competition (see e.g. Muchacka 2015) and many reforms seem to be there 'on paper' only (e.g. guidelines on not using grades during early childhood education). The system is said to reproduce and reinforce educational and social inequalities, as well as foster elitism by judging schools and pupils on the number of awards, achievements and competition wins (Kołodziejska and Mianowska 2008; Mikiewicz 2008). This view of schooling is reproduced by many respondents, who often point to a much lower 'level' of schools understood as a limited curriculum and slow pace of learning. While Jan accepts his daughter's school, he stresses that one particular teacher is much better than others:

*The level [of education] here is much lower, for sure lower than the corresponding grade in the Polish school. But this teacher that runs the class, their division, is one of the better 5th grades in the region, and accordingly the teacher keeps up a decent level, shows them some knowledge, so that's all right. (...) And anyways [the daughter] is doing okay I think because she is always in the top of her class. (...) There are things she can be proud of – the number of points she has collected and so on (Jan, 53, 2: 1980, 2004).*

Kornelia directly criticises the Norwegian school, which she believes does not demand enough of pupils. Her narrative is interesting in the sense that it highlights what is a commonly-held conviction in Poland, namely, that there is nothing wrong with a lot of studying (see also Pustułka 2013), and that many hours dedicated to homework every day are not at all problematic:

*I think their teaching methods are stupid. Instead of teaching the basics in some order, like it is done in Poland, they teach some irrelevant stuff (...). Maths is particularly poorly taught. [My child] is now in 4th grade and she is learning multiplication table just now (...) while my brother [4th grader in Poland] did it long time ago. (...) [Norwegians] have a completely different approach, far less homework because when I call home [in Poland, my brother] is always doing homework – an hour, an hour and a half (Kornelia, 34, 1: 2004).*

Other differences the parents also comment on are the issues related to school discipline and what is considered 'appropriate' school behaviour for children:

*I think in Poland there is more disciplining in school, in teaching, (...) here parents are called because a teacher cannot handle the children [in the second grade] so I wonder what she is going to do in two years. (...) So there was a meeting with parents, and the teacher talked to the children and they had to come up with a solution, they had to sign a contract at home, the parent as well (...) and it seems to have worked (Ela, 38, 3: 2003, 2005, 2008).*

Similarly, school is seen as promoting or allowing the behaviours that would not be found at the core of the Polish family values and what is seen as the Polish way of bringing up children:

*I think that children, well – I am not sure how it is now, but I feel like children in Poland have more discipline. Here children can do whatever they want – a mother would ask children about their wishes rather than tell them what to do. (...) I am not optimistic about this, I think a child needs to have some boundaries, needs to be taught to know their obligations. (...) Norwegian parents seem to be too lenient. Looking at teenagers like my daughter [who complains about not being allowed to do things] I am a very strict mother according to her because other children can go to school with painted nails, heavy make-up, dyed hair, they can be out in the town after 10 p.m. – my child is not allowed to do that, she is only 13 years old, so I am very different from Norwegian parents on this matter (Marcelina, 39, 2: 2001, 2007).*

To sum up, the three most common issues that parents find hard in Norwegian schools are the less demanding curriculums, a lax attitude to pupils and youth who are often said to behave in a disorderly manner, and, finally, minor complaints about school spaces being dirty and food served at educational institutions appearing unhealthy. The broader concerns are normally filtered through parents' own schooling experiences and their knowledge about education in Poland, which they continuously weigh against what their children encounter. Let us mention at this stage that the discrepancy between parental opinions about Norwegian schooling is very high and particularly illustrative of the two completely different ideologies relayed through education in the Polish and Norwegian system. In accordance with what Muchacka (2015) and Wærdahl (in this volume) concede about Polish parents being primarily concerned with measurable educational attainment and outcomes (e.g. passing tests, obtaining high grades) as well as ratings (e.g. being 'best' in one's division, winning prizes), their philosophy often collides with the Norwegian schooling system. It is usually the parents of older children or those who have spent more time abroad that are able to reassess their convictions and modify their evaluations. Antonina's story highlights such transformation from a negative to positive view, with the latter featuring appreciation for an individualised approach to the pupil and consideration given to developmental constraints:

*[Initially] I said 'Good Lord, what will my child grow up to be here?' [laughs] I was frightened, but then I [gained some] deeper understanding, I just looked harder, and eventually I realised that here they allow children to grow up. It is not their system that is flawed but ours in Poland (...) [where] children are overburdened with unnecessary things, really unnecessary subjects or curricula (...) the children need to have the right to be children (Antonina, 47, 3: 1993, 2000, 2003).*

At the same time, Antonina nevertheless underscored her daughter's unique achievements and fantastic results, similarly to Ilona and Adrian, whose story also supports the significance of flexibility that the Norwegian school offers in terms of not wasting children's abilities and talents:

*Primary school is definitely at a lower level here [in Norway...]. One example is [our daughter] who was (...) sent to learn Mathematics with pupils three grades above her (...) When she started middle school, she was going to Maths classes to a high school, to a different school. (...) But now when we compare university studies, I must say that I find the level of difficulty is really, really high (Ilona, 41, Adrian, 41, 2: 1994, 2004).*

Parents with older children are not the only ones to express positive opinions; it seems that positive experiences contribute to a change in earlier-held convictions:

*School here is great, really super! There were some opinions that the level of education in Norway is horribly low, and maybe there is a difference in other schools here, but I see [it is not so], when she [the daughter] has something to learn, and how many activities and exercises she gets from a teacher. So now I really do not believe that the level is low (Magda, 39, Michal, 40, 2: 2004, 2012).*

Let us now move on to responses that are unequivocally positive about Norwegian school. Here, the parents add several issues other than the individual approach and focus on age-related needs of children. They list a balance between study and play, as well as the amount of time spent outside as clear advantages. The conception of childhood and education that focuses not only on the intellectual aspects, but also includes the emotional and physical development of a child and adapts the learning pace to the child's needs was acknowledged:

*When six-year-olds go to school [in Poland] the classroom is not ready for them, they just study books, locked inside the school building. I like that here they (...) have breaks for playing, [children] can go outside, get some fresh air. (...) It is not stressful at all... [in Poland] they rush through the material and here it's different, it's calm (Klara, 31, 1: 2007).*

*I promised myself to look into a first-grader's textbook when I go to Poland next, I am very curious what I will find. (...) Everyone says that Polish education is a nightmare, there is just too much in the syllabus, too much and much too hard, children study all night. (...) The fact is that here the syllabus is fine. [My son] started school and now they are doing 10 in Maths and have not even done the whole alphabet yet. (...) They do one letter per week (Edyta, 37, 1: 2007).*

Zooming in on the issues vital to migration parenting and education, the respondents raise some points about the (general and language) support (or lack thereof) for children with migrant backgrounds, the curriculum content, student–teacher relations and the expectations towards parents. As mentioned above, the interviews illustrate that contemporary family migrants are disenchanted and understand the potential pitfalls of having (or moving with) children abroad and consequently are mostly appreciative of the efforts on the part of Norwegian schools towards successful welcoming of children. They refer to systemic policies outlined in the first part of this paper which include ‘welcome classrooms’, bilingual teaching assistants and language tutors. Though the aid may not be timely and requires parental effort, the instruments for easing the transition to a new egalitarian system are usually utilised:

*I found out that there is a law in Norway that a bilingual teacher must be provided but our commune said they cannot afford it and the child must be able to handle it alone. So I was understandably disappointed with the system. But as of the following September, [the daughter] was granted [help]. (...) They created a special division for children learning Norwegian and only there she was able to speak (Kamila, 46, 2: 2001, 2003).*

The above quoted Ilona and Adrian also did their research prior to the daughter's arrival and knew about the transition classrooms for language learners:

*[First] year it was the year of learning the language, so the child did not lose that year but rather moved forward with the curriculum [from where she stopped in Poland] but throughout that year she mostly studied Norwegian (Ilona, 41, Adrian, 41, 2: 1994, 2004).*

In general, the Norwegian school is seen as responding well to the challenges brought about by migration, though this should not be seen as universal due to the fact that support offered to migrant children is determined at the commune level and may vary significantly in terms of scope and availability of help (Ślusarczyk and Nikielska-Sekuła 2014). One area that parents stressed was the way in which schools handle ethnic diversity and religious pluralism, placing it in clear opposition to the concept of catechesis in Poland:

*They learn religion but not in the Polish way, they learn about Buddhism, Christianity. (...) They learn about many religions and not one religion that happens to be the one we believe in (Edyta, 37,1: 2007).*

To a certain degree, parents discuss the broader ideologies behind the multicultural classroom and promotion of diversity, rather than a specific response to the Polish influx, as Julia, quoted above, stated:

*There is a degree of tolerance among children, in Jola's class. Jola is from Poland and there are two girls from those Pakistani [Middle Eastern] countries. I know that in Oslo there are much more, more foreigners and maybe two or three Norwegians in the entire division, but here in the area there aren't that many, so the class is not so 'colourful'. There are those really good rules in school that you can either invite everyone or maybe like all girls for your birthday. But you can never invite (...) only one selected friend (Julia, 41, 2: 2006, 2008).*

The second part of this quote is of particular interest, as the inclusivity-driven strategies of Norwegian schools were consistently highlighted across multiple interviews:

*So here it is very good that when a teacher sees that a child is becoming isolated, retreats, then the teacher will try to include them in a group, first they sit down and talk to him or her, and then they include them in the group, they call upon some children so they play together and that child does not feel lonely, they have this type of system and I saw it in kindergartens many times. (...) No child must be isolated, in no way excluded, all children have to play together, it is actually forbidden to invite only a few classmates to your birthday party – you must invite everybody (Aneta, 34, Karol, 36, 2: 2007, 2013).*

These seemingly banal or inconsequential practices that are put in place to prevent ethnicity-based and other forms of discrimination or bullying, actually appear quite effective in the eyes of parents.

*[There is] different treatment on the grounds of ethnic origin (...) they underline that everyone is different and that has to be accepted. (...) When [the daughter] was in kindergarten the children had to draw their family [and one boy drew two daddies and two mommies] and she said it was cool. (...) [In Poland] we talk about 'divorced parents' [in a negative way...] that the boy has been left alone and here he has two mothers. (...) Here they work on getting the children together [and explaining] that everyone is different (Daria, 37, Adam, 38, 2: 2005, 2009).*

Apart from the above display of understanding for school's efforts, parents and children do not find it easy to reconcile their migrant cultural identity and educational entities as sites of socialisation (Ryan *et al.* 2008). The observations they share on the Norwegian schools highlight certain actions taken as a response to their children as individuals with specific migratory backgrounds. Edyta, for instance, stated during the interview:

*In the beginning [there were problems] with the Norwegian language, then, well, now these problems have returned, because, well, [the migrant background] matters. But if you are asking about racism or being treated differently because we are Polish then, no, we do not really feel that. [But... once on a tough day] I went to pick Felek up from school and Frida [his friend] said that I have no right to speak Polish at school (...), but she is just a kid, she did not mean it, it was not racist but it was about Felek being called out because he constantly uses Polish when speaking with his friend Martyna, Felek always picks Polish children to play with, it is easier for him. (...) The school forbids that (Edyta, 37, 1: 2007).*

The socialisation taking place in Norwegian educational institutions has obvious implications for children, but it also demands changes in parenting practices, especially with regard to home–school communications and engagement. There is something to be said about the child’s right to privacy, which until recently had not been respected in the Polish school, as bad grades and conduct of a child would be shared with all parents attending a class meeting. Marcelina clarifies:

*I like the fact that parent–teacher conferences in Norwegian schools are about school environment in general (...) whereas when there is something about children, then the teacher talks to the parents, sometimes also in the presence of the child. (...) In Poland every parent knows everything about every pupil (Marcelina, 39, 2: 2001, 2007).*

However, the novelty of individual consultations may also be a source of stress and frustrations, as the above-quoted Edyta mentions feelings of inadequacy stemming from mistranslating messages from the teachers and not doing certain things on time. Although she noted that she felt anxious about accepting an invitation to a social meet at the Norwegian home of fellow-parent due to her limited competency in Norwegian language, she overcame her doubts eventually:

*Sometimes some papers come and I fail to translate or misunderstand and [son] gets something later but we do not feel too much on the outs. I am invited over by other parents (...) but last time [when I got an invite] I said my Norwegian was not so good (...) but she said that it was definitely sufficient and so I went (Edyta, 37, 1: 2007).*

Overall, the experiences with Norwegian schooling might be difficult at first and certainly require reflection on the systemic complexity, yet the findings point to a rather optimistic feature of Polish parents’ complying with the destination country’s rules. Ultimately, the parental choice to adapt is conditional on a set of factors, both system-related (e.g., assistance or infrastructure) and individual (e.g., networks, openness to change or reflexivity). Furthermore, it is overpowered by a realisation that a return to Polish school would be near-impossible, and, for many, very much unwelcome, as they praise relationships built by their children with teachers and peers and a healthy balance of study and play.

## Discussion

Children’s schooling is one of the most powerful institutional and organisational concerns of migrant parents – especially mothers – worldwide (e.g. Parreñas 2005; Erel 2010; Vasquez 2010; Pratt 2012). This is closely linked to the fact that ‘varying levels of available cultural and social capital differentially enable parents to influence their children’s educational desires’ (Howard, McLaughlin and Vacha 1996: 146). The discrepancies in parental evaluations are not surprising as respondents find themselves at different stages of both parenting

and the length of their particular experience of handling school matters abroad. In the case of Poland, it was predominantly the social networks and the related social capital that played a vital role for schooling evaluations. Thus, migrants oriented ‘towards Poland’ (with largely Polish networks and strong ties with Poland) mostly compared their children with their kin members of similar age in Poland, while migrants oriented ‘towards Norway’ (with more diverse networks and fewer ties with Poland) were more inclined to adopt the Norwegian system and appreciate its advantages.

Underlining once more that a holistic analysis of school integration and attainment requires incorporation of extra-curricular activities, peer group membership, leisure, and strategies designed to maintain ethnic identities, it is nevertheless clear that an analysis centred on the school–family interactions and relations pinpoints the significant facets of both familial and institutional contexts. All too often, a general ‘conclusion’ on ‘temporary labour migrants’ (that can be extrapolated from earlier works within migration studies in particular) views women and children as problematic. Formerly, similarly to women, children abroad were portrayed as culturally inept, resisting integration, costly for welfare and causing social unrest. Smart explicitly wrote that ‘[c]hildren from minority ethnic backgrounds have tended to be understood as living problematic lives’ (Smart 2011: 104). This view has been perpetuated not only in research, but, more importantly, by the policy-makers in the education sector (see e.g. Suarez-Orozco and Carhill 2008, as well as Krüger-Potratz 2006 and Moskal 2014: 279, for critical perspectives). Such framings not only bring about the expected negative consequences for individuals, as families and migrant children are treated as deeply disadvantaged (Adams and Shambleu 2007), but also, when children do not ‘cause’ any problems, they simply become invisible (Wærdahl, in this volume). This type of universal lack of problematisation in turn may affect individual children, who pay the high price of being ‘thrown’ into a system that does not see them and are expected to invest unbelievable amounts of extra effort to keep up (Tomczyk-Maryon 2014).

An overly prominent focus on the anticipated lacks and shortcomings may translate into the ‘institutional discrimination’ phenomenon (see e.g. Gomolla and Radtke 2002; Gomolla 2010; Klemm 2010, who analyse this issue for Germany). This entails a ‘grey area’ between legally forbidden discrimination (i.e. rights which formally guarantee equal educational opportunities) and individual experiences, which are easier to spot, name and address. One of its main pitfalls is that it may appear without its agents being aware (Kristen 2006), and even include activities planned and intended to better the situation of pupils with migratory background. A typical scenario of institutional discrimination means that all problems of migrant students are automatically attributed to their ethnic/national origin and the (wrong)-doing of their parents, with no further explanations ever thought of. For example, the difficulties that a child is experiencing with the language and the presumed lack of parental support in this area (see e.g. Gomolla 2010), prevent the diagnosis of (health or behavioural) problems unrelated to one’s background (e.g. dyslexia, autism spectrum disorders). On the large scale, it leads to the so called statistical discrimination, which means that individual children are evaluated through the lens of problems that are believed to be prevalent in their ethnic group as a whole (Kristen 2006). The problem is henceforth reproduced under the hypothesis of (cultural) inheritance (Kalter 2005) and a conceptualisation of ethnicity as a hindrance and a predicate of insufficient cultural capital (Putnam 2007: 156). Indirect discrimination relies on the matrix of cross-institutional co-dependencies, namely the excessive bureaucratisation and a high number of regulations, limited flexibility, and low level of individualisation and agency. In different contexts, some instruments may serve either as support and assistance, or as a stepping stone for discrimination against migrant pupils. These include, for instance, a tendency to create homogenous classrooms (avoiding placing ‘different’ children with majority groups), an option of delaying school, transitional divisions and classrooms, placing children in a specialised school, and, paradoxically, even the language assistance. Though these instruments generally benefit children and parents, who assess them positively, they might prospectively be highlighted in the discriminatory actions in the future: being in need of help is perceived negatively by

evaluators making decisions about the child's career prospects and may affect their educational recommendations (Gomolla 2010: 13).

Consequently, much more productive results can be obtained by looking at the family and parents, and the impact that their age, ethnicity, habitus, attitudes and socio-economic status have on the matters related to children's schooling (Erel 2012; Gulczyńska and Wiśniewska-Kin 2013). For migrants, the length of stay abroad and having a foreign partner also correlated with a more grounded and balanced perspective. It is important to realise that parents' status might be relative to the temporary or permanent consequences of migration (e.g. parents' deskilling on the one hand, or more work-life balance in the family thanks to mobility, on the other) and it is interconnected with social capital and the level of investments that parents make into their children's future (Edwards, Franklin and Holland 2003: 4, cf. Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Erel 2012; Moskal 2014). Research findings suggest an increasingly global subscription to an idea of child-centrality, seen as '<sacralisation> of the economically <worthless> but morally and emotionally <priceless> child' (Hays 1996: 64, see also in the Polish case: Tarkowska 1996; Slany 2002; Giza-Poleszczuk 2005; Olcoń-Kubicka 2009). In addition, the 'fetishising' of children (examined by e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) was also addressed by Polish scholars who observed parents focusing on their children's futures at the expense of their own aspirations (Tarkowska 1996), naming the child the key investment that plays a crucial role in the parents' life as 'a tool for completing their unfulfilled dreams and plans' (Bojar 1991: 63, Olcoń-Kubicka 2009: 116).

Considering the socio-demographic characteristics of Polish migrants in Norway in the light of our findings, the assumption of the profound interest and engagement of parents in the schooling of their children seems well grounded. As the Polish kinship structures become ever more child-centric, the family must absolutely be viewed as an institution of socialisation in the post-migration context, which is (or eventually becomes) a full-fledged partner in the scholarly and social integration efforts extended by the Norwegian schools towards incoming children. Somehow the institutional support and indispensable help (especially regarding the language acquisition) described above must be combined with clearly expressed expectations towards parents, as well as encouragement of their cooperation and participation, all of these apparently proven as possible under the premise of the Norwegian system (see e.g. Cummins 2000; Suarez-Orozco and Qin 2006; Adams and Shambleau 2007; Miller *et al.* 2013).

To conclude, thus far only some parent-respondents (normally those who have lived in Norway for a longer time period) seem truly reflective about the school-home communication and the underlying cultural assumption of parental participation in school activities. This might be simply due to the fact that the Polish flow to Norway is still relatively recent and, unlike in other destinations, limited resources are available which would translate the 'culture of the system' (see e.g. Ryan *et al.* 2008; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Lopez Rodriguez, Sales, D'Angelo and Ryan 2010; Praszalowicz *et al.* 2013) into the terms and rules understandable to parents.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it needs to be considered that the Polish population in Norway should be seen as diverse, including people from different age generations, with varied migration motivations, being part of mixed or homogenous couples, with children who were born in Norway, or those who came at the ages ranging from toddlers to teenagers. All of them have increasingly different needs and expectations towards educational entities. The analysis of the interview data points to parents believing to be required to contribute 'a lot' to schooling and education of their children, with some parents seeing it as 'too much' and too huge a demand. At the same time, the respondents follow the cultural norm brought on from Poland, which tells them to ultimately follow the rules of the institution that holds the faith of their children in their hand – very much so as they would do in Poland. While initially Polish families may fail to simply transfer their social capital across the borders, they quickly learn that the legitimised educational capital in the destination country requires them to manage resources in a way that fosters integration and social attachments with their place of residence (see e.g. Park and Abelman 2004; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Erel 2010, 2012). In other words, parents are socialised to embrace

norms about the participatory nature of parental engagement in the school life. Evidently, some parents begin to see the schooling as much more than measurable progress or an extensive process of learning that necessarily requires grading, as they observe the benefits of the Norwegian school that teaches children about the very nature of acquiring skills and knowledge at their own pace and in line with a less competitive approach.

To reiterate the answers to the questions asked in this article: the first set of issues is linked to the types of parental generalisations about schooling (both negative – poor curriculum, and positive – focus on health, individual approach, diversity, laid-back approach). These have to be examined in both systemic and ‘experienced’ dimensions, as we demonstrated that parents conduct evaluations – both *ad-hoc* and more reflexively – and link them with institutional capacity and locally available assistance, often using Poland *vis-à-vis* Norway comparisons in their arguments. Although there was some criticism of the Norwegian schooling (e.g. the conviction that curriculums are not as strong as in Poland), the parents whose children had spent more time in Norway were able to develop and express a more balanced understanding of the system, seeing ‘flaws’ in a more positive light (e.g. children not being overworked, having more practical knowledge). The second research aim was to additionally analyse the particular and non-systemic factors for educational pathways of success and dissatisfaction for Polish migrant children abroad (individually sought and implemented solutions, chance encounters, etc.). Here the findings support the context-dependent outcomes for each family, which are very much tied to the governing institutional system and, even more so, determined by its local realisation, as tools or support found by a one family in a given school or commune are not necessarily available elsewhere, or, possibly, might not be suitable for addressing the needs and trajectory of a Polish family at another location.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Akkerman and Hagelund (2007) introduce a distinction between official and de facto multiculturalism. The former indicates a politically agreed integration strategy deployed by the government from above and (more or less) enforced under a legalised premise. The latter refers to actions corresponding to the assumptions behind multiculturalism without it being officially recognised.

<sup>2</sup> *Educational Equality in Practice, Strategies for Better Learning and Increased Participation for Language Minorities in Kindergartens, Schools and Continued Education 2004–2009*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Norskopplæring Program* deals with the societal and cultural matters. Its aim is to help with orientation and communication in Norway. It is designed to lift the participant to that specific level of language competence that an individual requires.

<sup>4</sup> This solution is used by some communes in and around Oslo, for example in Baerum. Note that the selection of a particular aid option is up to the commune and is based on its policy, financial standing, and the number of migrant children.

<sup>5</sup> Intercultural curricula are part of a wider conceptualisation of intercultural education. In the European context, they are detailed and abundantly documented, for instance in the following documents: Council of Europe, Declaration on Intercultural Education Athens, 12 November 2003, EC 2005 document *Immigrant Communities’ Integration in Europe Through Multilingual Schools and Education*, INI/2004/2267, or the European Parliament resolution of 2 April 2009 on educating the children of migrants (2008/2328/INI).

<sup>6</sup> The OECD Report confirming to the inclusivity of the Norwegian system by Taguma *et al.* (2009) is part of the larger series *OECD Reviews of Migrants Education*.

<sup>7</sup> The research leading to these results has received funding from the Polish–Norwegian Research Programme operated by the National Centre for Research and Development under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009–2014 in the frame of Project Contract No Pol-Nor/197905/4/2013.



<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that 25 out of 57 children were interviewed for the Transfam's Work Package 5 about their experiences of growing up transnationally. As we supply the voices of parents, a paper by Slany and Strzemecka in this volume, also stemming from Transfam project, tackles the related issues of belonging among respondents' children.

<sup>9</sup> To inform the readers about some basic background of our respondents, we provide annotation to our interview quotes in the following format: pseudonym-coded name, age of the respondent, number of children: their dates of births.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Lopez Rodriguez *et al.* (2010) prepared a bilingual guide on educating children in British schools for Polish parents. A similar guideline for Norway should become a prioritised practical policy recommendation. Within the Transfam's project, we are organising workshops (for migrant Polish parents and Norwegian social workers) and writing a pilot programme of intercultural education as part of our project deliverables for 2016.

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