

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary



What is the role of schooling in the integration and settlement process of 'new' Polish migrants to the UK?

Though the post-accession migration wave from Poland to the UK was initially seen as transient, a clear trend towards settlement and family formation has by now been acknowledged. One of the signs of the settlement process is the considerable increase in numbers of Polish children in British schools¹. This briefing focuses on issues related to schooling and how these impact on the integration of Polish families and their future migration decisions.

The EU Enlargement of 2004 entailed an intensive large-scale migration wave from Eastern European countries to the UK, in particular from Poland. The Polish community in the UK has thus grown significantly over the last few years and is now the single largest foreign national group resident in the UK. Significantly, unlike other migrant communities, this community is characterised by wide geographical dispersal: Polish nationals have been registered in every single local authority across the UK². The intensity and simultaneous dispersal of this migration wave has evoked a particular interest among researchers from the Centre for Population Change (CPC) at the University of Southampton.

The three-year CPC ESRC-funded project: 'International labour mobility and its impact on family and household formation among Polish migrants living in England and Scotland' aimed to explore the impact of regional and local differences on the everyday lives of Polish migrants. To this end, 83 in-depth interviews were carried out in four locations across the UK: two urban (Southampton and Glasgow), and two rural (Dorset in Southern England and Perthshire/Angus in Scotland). Our target group was adult Poles who had been living in Britain for at least 12 months.

Our interviews covered a wide variety of topics, including:

- reasons behind the decision to migrate
- plans as to stay, return or further migration
- housing history
- family relations and family-related plans
- children and schooling
- work
- social life
- perceptions of one's neighbourhood

Though schooling was not the major focus of our study, it appeared to be a theme of crucial importance to the Polish parents.

Schools as 'sites of socialisation'

Schooling plays a natural role in the integration of migrant children³. For many Polish children, the school setting is the major environment through which they acquire knowledge of English and whereby they establish friendships. Therefore, it is the school that provides the main arena for integration practices.



However, the extent to which the child integrates with the new environment depends on a number of factors, most importantly:

- age
- knowledge of English
- the social composition of the school and the class.

Notably, while schooling acts as a major integrating factor in the case of children, this is not the case for their parents. Polish parents rarely become involved in the wider life of the school or establish closer contacts with other (British/foreign) parents, predominantly because of the language barrier. In general, they remain very much 'silent spectators' in the context of the school environment. Still, this is not a sign of negligence: their children's education is of great importance to the majority of Polish migrants, regardless of their own educational background. However, the poor language skills of many parents have bearing on their communication with schools and in consequence levels of involvement in their children's education. Polish parents often feel deeply frustrated by their lack of knowledge and understanding of what their child does at school, and hence their inability to support their children in their learning.

Adjustment and integration in local contexts

The local context is highly significant for the school adaptation and wider integration of Polish (and other migrant) children. Take the example of language support: migrant children in Scotland generally receive substantially more language support than those in England, and migrant children in rural areas in both regions receive considerably less support than their peers living in urban areas. Moreover, in Scotland language support is more needs-targeted and depends on the age at which the child enters the school (with younger children receiving in-school support and older children attending language courses especially designed for foreign pupils), while in England there seems to be less differentiation according to age (with most pupils in urban areas receiving one or two hours of linguistic support per week from bilingual teaching assistants).

How the child integrates into the school environment is also largely dependent on reception and school/class composition. In this case, local contexts are also of great importance yet the interdependence between area and integration is less clear-cut. In

the case of some rural schools, the Polish child was their first foreign pupil ever, while in certain urban schools, there were large numbers of Polish pupils. Nevertheless, how the Polish children are received by their peers is highly location-specific with no clear rural/urban or Scottish/English divisions. For example, in some rural areas where often post-accession Polish children were the first 'foreign' pupils to enter the school, other children would be very friendly towards them, while in others they would be less open and sometimes hostile to the newcomers.

However, it seems that children who enter schools where there are few or no other Polish pupils establish friendships with their British peers quicker than children who are in more ethnically-mixed schools: they tend to keep to 'their own kind' (also largely because of the language and/or social support received from their compatriots or other migrant children). Moreover, integration is far easier for those children who enter schools in Britain at a young age than for teenagers who struggle both with the language barrier and with entering established friendship groups.

Schooling as barrier to return

Significantly, there are stark differences between the Polish and British education systems in terms of organisation, requirements and the overall philosophy of teaching. Polish parents thus tend to perceive the British education system as one of considerably lower standards than the Polish one and such perception has great impact on their settlement (or return/further migration) decisions. Parents of young children often leave making final decisions as to settlement or return to their child's reaching of (Polish) school age. However, parents of older children, who have already spent a few years within the British education system, frequently decide to prolong their stay for fear that their children will 'not manage' upon (re-)entering the Polish education system. Therefore, many Polish parents see schooling as a serious barrier to prospective return.

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¹Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2007) Schools and Pupils in England, January 2007, SFR 30/2007.

²Rabindrakumar, S. (2008) Mapping Migration, The Guardian, 28 February. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/feb/27/immigrationandpublicservicesimmigration>

³D'Angelo, A. and Ryan, L. (2011) Sites of socialisation: Polish parents and children in London schools. *Przeglad Polonijny*, XXXVII (1), pp. 237-258. ISSN 0137-303X

References: Trevena, P. (2009) 'New' Polish migration to the UK: a synthesis of existing evidence. CPC Working Paper 3, ESRC Centre for Population Change, UK.