CHAPTER 38

Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: Two Schools Under One Roof—One Is Offline, the Other One Online

Przemek Stolarski

Context: Homogenous? Not Anymore

At the end of January 2021, I was writing about the Polish education system for one of my assignments at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Attempting to capture the main characteristics of schools in Poland, I did not hesitate twice to write that our schools are relatively homogenous, with little diversity in terms of students' national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Simply put: this claim did not age well because just a few months later schools in Poland had to cater to an entirely new, diverse population. **As a result of the war in Ukraine, Poland became the second-largest host nation of refugees in the entire world**. With the estimated 3 million Ukrainian refugees making up roughly 8 percent of Poland's population—the vast majority of whom are children—the list of challenges faced by Polish schools is long. Fast forward just a few months later, every day approximately 10,000 kids from Ukraine were

P. Stolarski (✉)
Białystok, Poland
e-mail: przemekstolarski@outlook.com

© The Author(s) 2024

L. F. Nathan et al. (eds.), *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46297-9_38

enrolling in Polish schools (Głos, 2022). Special schools with instruction in Ukrainian and Russian were being created. Classrooms with students speaking three or four different languages were slowly becoming the new normal. Within the timespan of barely a few months, the landscape of Polish schools has changed dramatically and many of the long-held assumptions no longer hold true. While in many countries the debate around equity and inclusion has been going on for decades, Polish schools with their lack of diversity never picked up this theme. **But as of now, there is nothing homogenous about students' demographics in Poland.**

For Ukrainian students, finding their way around the system is not easy. Take, for example, Olya, a high school senior from a city in Ukraine, Drohobych. She comes across as very confident and outspoken. Maybe even a little bit hyperactive, with her hands gesturing almost non-stop. Serving as an interpreter for her mom, she translates from Polish to Russian with the speed of light. Sometimes, I do not even finish my question and she is already turned to her mom, ready with the Russian version of my question. It just happens that I understand enough Russian to know that she also adds quite a bit to her mom's responses. Nothing that would change the substance of the answer, just a few words here and there making the replies sound more definitive or, rather, articulate. In all honesty, one could barely believe she is just 17. Olya came to Poland with her family in May. Like many Ukrainians, she has lots of relatives scattered all around Poland. The country is not entirely new to her. She would come and visit them every summer so her Polish is quite good. But it might not be good enough for a place at the University of Warsaw. Just a few weeks ago, Olya applied for a spot in the coveted MISH program—an interdisciplinary college program in humanities and social sciences. It is one of the few programs with an interview requirement. All applicants need to present on a humanities-focused issue of their choice but also answer questions related to Polish history or literature. With no background in Polish schools, Olya spent the last few weeks preparing for the interview. She feels confident. What worries her is how the oral presentation is evaluated. One of the criteria? "An excellent command of academic language." Even being relatively fluent in Polish, she lacks the exposure to the type of language that one encounters only in academic work. On top of that, Ukrainians graduate from high schools two years earlier than their Polish counterparts so Olya is also younger than other applicants. "There is still

some time until October when the academic year starts," she says with a tiny smile of hope.

While it is not the most extreme example, Olya's story is illustrative of the very real consequences of undemocratic education. No public education system can be seen as democratic if it is not designed with **inclusiveness and access**—one of the crucial elements of this book's framework. The specific lesson from the situation in Poland is that these aspects of inclusiveness and access need to be deeply entrenched in our daily work of designing educational experiences. It cannot be an afterthought. If it is, we are doomed to fail and replicate the undemocratic character of education.

It is in this context that I was invited to join a team of experts from Transatlantic Future Leaders Forum to write a comprehensive report on how to efficiently integrate refugee-kids from Ukraine into the Polish education system (Di Maggio et al., 2022). In this work, I experienced how tackling the refugee crisis through educational technology provides an opportunity to rethink the system, making it more inclusive and democratic. The following paragraphs are my, although limited, account of how this opportunity was (not) used and why.

Introduction: Design, Not Accommodations

The report was commissioned by the Polish Ministry of Education and we all wanted to use the chance to work with the major decision-makers in the field of education to create actionable advice on democratizing Polish schools. Currently, by most metrics, they are not. Students, teachers, and local communities alike do not have a say in how our schools operate. The symptoms are visible: a record-high number of teachers are leaving the profession, there were multiple failures to provide quality remote education during the pandemic, and there is a growing frustration with public education resulting in the rise of private, alternative schools, as well as homeschooling. With this context in mind, our entire team was committed to argue that the influx of Ukrainian refugees must be a catalyst for systemic changes in Polish schools.

Yet, it is frequently in these kinds of circumstances—where schools need to manage and evolve to meet the moment—that the real democratic deficit appears. With educational challenges of this scale, the natural tendency of policymakers and government stakeholders is to come up with ad hoc accommodations rather than engage in crafting structural, long-term

solutions. And when it comes to accommodations, it becomes almost obvious to seek answers in quick technological solutions such as language learning apps or e-learning materials. Sadly, so many of them turn out to be disappointing or even entirely misplaced. "*Although there is an overwhelming consensus of how EdTech can contribute to learning and the facilitation of the learning process, many EdTech initiatives are designed without taking existing evidence into consideration*"—reports a comprehensive synthesis of studies on EdTech in refugee contexts published by Save the Children (Tauson and Stannard, 2018).

Witnessing the shortcomings of these newly introduced solutions, it seems entirely fair to ask: **can EdTech even help in building democratic schools?** And when the entire country's public education system suffers from a democratic deficit, how can we answer new challenges not only with new tools but also with a renewed understanding of democratic education? Feeling the sense of disappointment about our limited coverage of this aspect in the report, I pondered on these questions for months. In the following paragraphs, I present three challenges of using EdTech in building democratic schools and potential recommendations to tackle them.

Can EdTech Even Help in Building Democratic Schools?

Challenge 1. Generic EdTech Tool: Ukraine Edition

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it might be beneficial to start with the question: **who should take initiative in developing EdTech solutions for the ongoing refugee crisis?** As we have seen in the first months since the 2022 Ukraine invasion, there are multiple bottom-up initiatives of informal groups and NGOs (e.g., a mentoring program launched by Polish teenagers or a training program for Ukrainian teachers organized by Teach for Poland). Insofar as these initiatives might bring a lot of value, organizations behind them are often "*innovating outside their core competencies*" (Dahya, 2016). Few organizations can count refugee education as their core competency. In Poland, the history of refugee education is almost non-existent. **To illustrate this, in 2020 there were only 19 multicultural educators hired by Polish schools. In March 2022, there were 150 of them—a massive increase but still too few to meet the needs** (Mikulska, 2022). Taking into account this lack of expertise,

the fears of new technology programs being unsustainable are not unfounded. Negin Dahya, a world-renowned expert in refugee education, argues that EdTech interventions targeting refugees must be sustainable, otherwise "*unfulfilled hopes and promises related to technology-based or technology-enabled programs that fail could break trust and demoralize communities*" (Dahya, 2016). The interventions developed in the private sector are even more likely to be problematic in that regard. Even a quick look into the database of Ukraine-focused EdTech solutions created by European EdTech Alliance shows that the vast majority of these initiatives are hasty adaptations of ongoing services to the new context, translations of resources and tools into Ukrainian, or existing services that are simply offered for free to Ukrainians. With profit as the main incentive of private entrepreneurs, their interests and the interests of refugees are more than likely to be misaligned. It is important to emphasize that while these initiatives can be in their own ways helpful, they cannot fulfill the promise of sustainability.

On top of that, the lack of Ukrainian refugees' input into the design process of these interventions is also a problem. The complexity of their stories is likely to be absent or misrepresented as it is frequently controversial from a political standpoint. For example, while there are some resources for educators focusing on the controversies around racist treatment of non-white refugees from Ukraine (Re-Imagining Migration, 2022), this theme is almost entirely absent in any larger-scale education interventions that are currently developed in Poland. As these issues create the threat of uncovering the negligence and discrimination of Polish authorities, there is no incentive to talk about them. Without the involvement of refugees themselves, there are only few people left who can advocate for the inclusion of such issues in education.

Recommendation: Ensuring that interventions are appropriately contextualized, organizations behind them have expertise and their incentives aligned with the needs of the served community is critically important. In Poland, this means:

- All EdTech tools should be co-designed with a variety of community members: refugees, local school authorities, and different demographics of students and teachers.
- Given the diversity of refugees' experiences, the consultations should include a broad range of constituents and also happen locally to account for a range of needs represented by different communities;

- More cooperation is necessary between private entities and NGOs (e.g., a consortium or alliance) to ensure that the funding is allocated to evidence-based solutions most likely to yield desirable educational and social outcomes as opposed to overlapping solutions.

The sense of agency—crucial for democratic education—needs to be embedded in all interventions, while their sustainability should be an important consideration from the very beginning.

Challenge 2. Two Schools Under One Roof: One—Offline, the Other One—Online

One of the major recommendations in our report for the Ministry was to task the ministry's technology group with creating a nation-wide educational platform that would be based on three pillars: information and effort coordination; training and capacity building; and educational resources.

With the benefit of hindsight, **I regret that our team has not explored the possibility of suggesting the creation of a platform that would be a joint effort of the Polish and Ukrainian ministries of education**. This could have prevented the beginnings of a parallel education system that seems to be emerging right now. Recently, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education created the National Online School—an e-learning platform focused on maintaining the continuity of education for refugees with online asynchronous and synchronous learning. But this well-intentioned effort of the Ukrainian Ministry has had unintended consequences. **As of today, many students that escaped to Poland are not integrated into Polish educational institutions but receiving education primarily through the National Online School**. In some cases, Ukrainian students—unable to fully follow lessons in Polish as a language of instruction—use the platform to study on their own. A huge part of them does not even enroll in Polish schools (Igielska, 2022).

In another part of the report, we wrote about the so-called two schools under one roof model present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whereby students share the same school building but operate under two entirely separate systems with different teachers, curricula, and resources. Based on ethnic segregation, this practice is discriminatory and teaches children there are inherent differences between them (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2018). Little did we know that "two schools

under one roof" will manifest itself in Poland with the grave help of technology. Insofar as the popularity of the National Online School might be only temporary, it carries a great risk of depriving children of formal schooling experiences and contributing to the permanent exclusion of Ukrainian kids from Polish schools. **It appears that two schools under one roof is quickly becoming a viable and concerning prospect, but this time the two schools differ in modality: one is offline, the other one—online.**

Recommendation: EdTech interventions need to be cognizant of the risks of segregation and exclusion of refugee populations and, especially, of the potential technology has to cause segregation as an unintended consequence.

- The efforts between Polish and Ukrainian stakeholders must be more coordinated, e.g., through the creation of a joint group between the countries' respective ministries of education that would discuss policies likely to impact the refugee population.
- Recognizing the hardly replaceable experience of traditional school, all legislative and technological solutions need to prioritize formal schooling and permanent integration.
- The educational outcomes of the refugee population need to be accurately measured and tracked over time to provide stakeholders with data necessary to take informed decisions.

Challenge 3. Language Gatekeeping

The unprecedented scale of refugee migration to Poland is likely to be seen as nothing but a source of multiple problems. This risk is likely to be particularly visible in the field of education, where the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of new students is, by all means, going to stretch under-resourced schools. Language difference is among the most feared aspects. In light of this, it is even more important to remember about the deep need of substituting a deficit-based approach with an asset-based approach. This is important in regard to children. In the report, we wrote:

> when creating solutions to integrate Ukrainian children and youth into Polish educational institutions, the characteristics potentially ascribed to them, such as their lack of Polish language skills or their intense experience of the ongoing war, should not define them. Young people joining Polish

> schools will, like any other students, have their passions, interests, strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the new students of Polish schools have no control over the narrative through which they may be perceived. For example, the lack of knowledge of the Polish language—foreign to the vast majority of refugees—is not an objective deficit but only a potential difficulty created by the new context in which the refugees found themselves.

Importantly, this approach needs to be extended to adults. One of the most obvious assets that should be a part of creating solutions are Ukrainian teachers. According to the latest estimates of the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, about 22,000 teachers fled Ukraine, most of them to Poland. While the newly introduced legislation makes it easier to hire them in Polish schools, there are still massive training needs. To date, there are no EdTech solutions that would make it easier for Ukrainians to enter Polish schools as teachers. In our report, we suggested utilizing microlearning-based forms of professional development for both Polish and Ukrainian teachers alike. For the former, it would potentially allow them to react on the spot to the dynamically changing situations of their classrooms, making their learning relevant. For the latter, it would decrease the training time, allowing them to enter classrooms faster and gain employment. While, to my knowledge, there is a lack of a directly applicable blueprint project of professional development in similar circumstances, there is no shortage of inspiration. For example, Cell-Ed has successfully utilized low-tech microlearning to provide skills such as increasing employability to different demographics.

Fortunately, some initiatives very visibly embraced an asset-based approach. For example, Nana, a project run by The Village Network—an early childhood EdTech startup, connects Ukrainian nannies with Polish families, providing training inspired by the Reggio-Emilia pedagogy. In the first few months of the refugee crisis, it was evident that refugees would experience language gatekeeping, and their lack of proficiency in Polish would be frequently seen as a consequential deficit. Nana's approach challenges that by emphasizing academic evidence for the benefits of growing up with foreign language caregivers.

Recommendation: EdTech solutions must go beyond supporting language acquisition. In the spirit of asset-based approach, they should find ways in which existing assets of Ukrainian refugees can be best leveraged.

- Bilingualism must be embraced as the new reality of the Polish education system, e.g., all important information related to school activities need to be presented also in Russian/Ukrainian; formal school communication with parents should take place in both languages; school should display information on their website/social media in both languages.
- To fulfill the promise of democratizing education, all of the constituencies, including the most marginalized and vulnerable, need to be recognized for their potential to contribute and the sole lack of Polish proficiency should not be the reason for excluding people.
- Ukrainian teachers, educators, and caretakers need to be hired for a variety of different roles at Polish schools in recognition of their unique knowledge of refugees' lived experiences and as a means to create ground for permanent integration.

Conclusion: EdTech Not for Digital Tracking

Perhaps it might not be very intuitive to evaluate the state of democracy in schools through the lens of educational technology. This is also apparent in the themes covered by other chapters in this book—technology is not central to any of them. After all, the questions of agency, power, and authority in schools—all intimately related to democracy—are largely about interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. But it is exactly in how technology is utilized, especially in times of change, that we can see some of the greatest democratic deficits.

Too rarely, technology is used to increase participation and give voice. Instead of including students in co-designing learning experiences, the same power structures are being replicated and only mediated through technology. What might be a helpful tool to avoid this pitfall in using technology is the SAMR Model (Fig. 38.1) developed by Dr. Ruben R. Puentedura. The model is meant to serve as a taxonomy for using educational technology (Puentedura, 2013). While it refers mostly to classroom usage, its general structure can also be informative for wider implementations of EdTech solutions. According to the model, educators can use technology to redefine, modify, augment, or substitute different elements of teaching and learning.

Most often, the use of technology is limited to substitution with no functional change to the character of learning experiences. In some cases, however, substitutes can be harmful. This is, no doubt, the case when

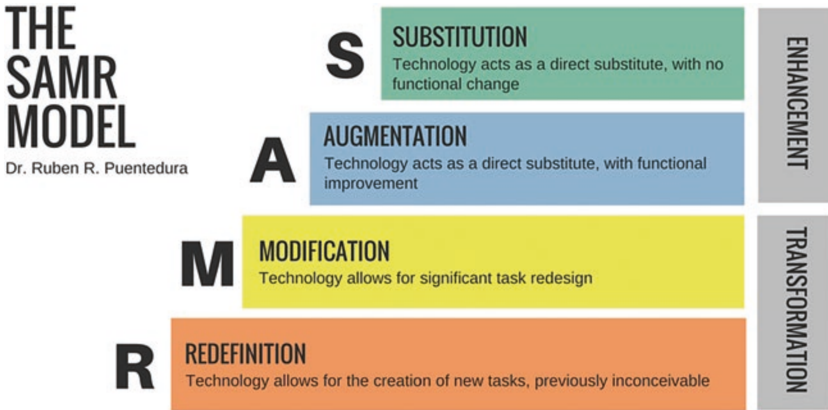

Fig. 38.1 The SAMR model

formal school experiences, full of peer interactions and opportunities for building meaningful relationships with adults, are substituted with a poor online alternative. It is even worse when technology is used as a tool for creating tiered educational systems with separate tracks of subpar quality. In fact, this digital "tracking" has been happening for many years now. Top universities offering much cheaper online degrees or certificate program of questionable quality are a prime example. **In that case, one's socioeconomic background determines the "track." If tiered systems continue to be created in Poland, the factor determining one's track might become nationality**.

This nationally segregated education can come about in a very inconspicuous manner. We know it from other contexts: lots of technologies that become means of segregation are adopted precisely because of their promise of personalization and their ability to accommodate "special needs." And it is exactly this type of thinking that we need to get rid of. Truly democratic schools are capable of recognizing their various and changing constituents as equals: giving them space to use their funds of knowledge and work together to design solutions. There is no doubt that EdTech can be, and already is, an important part of that. In the context of Poland, the massive help provided by language learning apps, tools supporting bilingual instruction, or, simply, digital educational resources should obviously not be underestimated. But none of it will matter if we lose vigilance and allow digital segregation to set in.

References

Dahya, N. (2016). *Education in conflict and crisis: How can technology make a difference? A landscape review*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/20160303_Landscape_Review_ICT4E_in_Conflict_and_Crisis.pdf

Di Maggio, A., Jacyna, M., Kolasiński, T., Owczarek, A., Kotrych, Z., Żurawska, W., Witkowska, J., Stysło, M., Stolarski, P., & Pujszo, P. (2022). *Rekomendacje systemowe dotyczące integracji dzieci-uchodźców z Ukrainy*. Transatlantic Future Leaders Forum. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://transatlanticforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TLFL-Raport-o-integracji-dzieci-z-Ukariny_web.pdf

Głos Nauczycielski. (2022). *Czarnek: Liczba Uczniów z Ukrainy Przyrasta o 10 tys. dziennie. Obecnie w Polskich szkołach jest 85 tys. Dzieci—Uchodźców*. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://glos.pl/czarnek-liczba-uczniow-z-ukrainy-przyrasta-o-10-tys-dziennie-obecnie-w-polskich-szkolach-jest-85-tys-dzieci-uchodzcow

Igielska, B. (2022). *Ukraińskie dzieci w polskiej szkole. "Fluoryzacja? Co to do licha jest?!"* Onet. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/ukrainskie-dzieci-w-polskiej-szkole-fluoryzacja-co-to-u-licha-jest/mpg712p

Mikulska, A. (2022). *Lekcje polskiego to nie wszystko. Jak zadbać o integrację dzieci z Ukrainy?* Oko.press. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://oko.press/lekcje-polskiego-to-nie-wszystko-jak-zadbac-o-integracje-dzieci-z-ukrainy

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (2018). *"Two schools under roof" the most visible example of discrimination in education in Bosnia and Hercegovina*. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/8/404990.pdf

Puentedura, R. R. (2013). SAMR: Moving from enhancement to transformation [Web blog post]. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from http://www.hippasus.com/rrpweblog/archives/000095.html

Re-Imagining Migration. (2022). *Talking and teaching about the refugee crisis in Ukraine and beyond*. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://reimaginingmigration.org/talking-and-teaching-about-the-refugee-crisis-in-ukraine-and-beyond

Tauson, M., & Stannard, L. (2018). *EdTech for learning in emergencies and displaced settings*. Save the Children. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://resource-centre-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/edtech-learning.pdf

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.