Educational Disadvantages During COVID-19 Pandemic Faced by Migrant Schoolchildren in Poland

Anzhela Popyk1 · Paula Pustułka1

Accepted: 15 March 2022 / Published online: 7 April 2022 © The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

Experiencing migration in childhood affects social, educational, and psychological aspects of child development. Migrant children are prone to educational setbacks, which may be further exacerbated by concurrent crises. This study examines the so-called transnational transitions of migrant schoolchildren in Poland by treating distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a new vulnerability factor. This study adopts Merton’s concept of cumulative (dis)advantages (the “Matthew effect”) and combines it with the modern framing of the digital divide developed by Ragnedda and Ruiu. The data are drawn from a qualitative study with migrant children, their parents, and teachers, in which interviews were conducted during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The findings demonstrate that migration experience, distance learning, and the digital divide overlap in producing educational inequalities among migrant schoolchildren in Poland.

Keywords Educational inequalities · Cumulative disadvantages · Migrant children · COVID-19 · Distance learning

Introduction

Transnational childhood (Orellana et al., 2001) is an integral phenomenon of global migration in the modern world. However, the growing number of foreign immigrants, including children, has only recently become a notable issue in Poland as a new destination country in international population flows (Kaczmarczyk, 2015). Even with these new arrivals, especially those from the nearest Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Belarus (Office for Foreigners, 2021), Poland remains quite homogeneous in terms of its residents’ ethnic, national, linguistic, and religious identities. However, within the last decade, the number of immigrants holding legal residence in Poland grew fivefold and now accounts for 1.2% of the
local population.\(^1\) This includes minors aged 0 – 18 years, the number of which increased from 10,000 in 2010 to 52,000 in 2020 (Migration Statistics, 2021). Consequently, migrant children’s\(^2\) schooling is emerging as an important field of inquiry at the junction of education research and migration studies in Poland (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015; Popyk, 2021).

Educational policies and practices toward migrant children have remained in flux (Kościółek, 2020) since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Distance learning was introduced in Polish schools in March 2020 and operated, almost without interruption, for the subsequent 14 months. This has increased the learning gap between migrant children and their non-migrant peers (Gornik et al., 2020). Because distance education requires learning through the use of digital devices and the Internet, educational inequalities have been exacerbated by the digital divide (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001). Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) delineated a three-level digital divide involving a lack of equity in physical-digital access, uneven digital skills, and disparities in knowing how to deploy digital capital for the betterment of other life opportunities, along with other forms of human capital.

This study examines how migrant children in Poland experienced educational inequalities during pandemic-related school closures. The key argument is that recent migration paired with distance learning causes an accumulation of educational disadvantages. We take a critical approach rooted in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) that demonstrates how digital inequalities intensified by distance learning overlap with educational, social, and economic inequalities caused by migration, thereby creating a composite vulnerability (see also Rinne et al., 2000) which is greater than the sum of its parts. Referencing the so-called Matthew effect, as proposed by Merton (1968), this study revives the argument that the accumulation of inequalities is an “ongoing process and not (…) a single event [during which] the rich get forever richer while the poor become poorer” (Merton, 1988, p. 610).

Using data from qualitative child-centered research with migrant children \((n = 19)\), their parents \((n = 18)\), and teachers \((n = 10)\) conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, this study offers a contemporary analysis of existing and emerging vulnerabilities. In addition to showcasing how children of different ethnic backgrounds fare academically in the context of prolonged distance learning, the study also discusses the perspectives of parents and teachers who have been affected by the crisis.

We address three research questions: (1) What are the pre-existing contexts of educational inequalities among migrant children in Poland? (2) How have migrant children in Poland experienced digital inequalities during COVID-19 distance learning? (3) What are the roles of parents and teachers in preventing intersectional vulnerabilities and cumulative disadvantages experienced by migrant children?

\(^1\) Note that, according to UN DESA data, the share of immigrants in Poland in 2020 was 2.2%. https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=stock_abs_&f=2010&cm49=616

\(^2\) The term “migrant children” is used to define foreign-born children.
Theorizing Migration-Related Educational Disadvantages

In a now-classic work, Merton (1968, 1988) proposed the concept of cumulative (dis)advantages to study how the allocation of rewards to scientists was driven by certain psychological processes. Analyzing the cases of Nobel laureates, the author pointed to the problem of a complex pattern of “misallocation” (Merton, 1968, p. 59), referring to the unfair treatment as the “Matthew effect,” in which those who have already been deemed successful are further promoted. Regarding the Matthew effect, Merton noted the cumulation of (dis)advantages in science, which impeded young scholars from having their talents recognized and “accentuate[d] inequalities in science and learning: inequalities of peer recognition, inequalities of access to resources, and inequalities of scientific productivity” (Merton, 1988, p. 616).

Following Merton, Dannefer (2003) acknowledged that being in a (dis)advantaged position is a “systemic tendency for interindividual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g., money, health, or status) with the passage of time” (p. 237). This is concurrent with intersectional approaches that signal that cumulative (dis)advantages are neither ascribed to individuals nor exist in a social vacuum, but rather become inherent properties of sociodemographic cohorts and social collectives relegated to unfavorable positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Dannefer, 2003).

Therefore, growing inequalities can go far beyond individuals’ abilities to overcome bias, as they emerge across micro-, meso-, and macro-social structures (Dannefer et al., 2018). Thus, lines can justifiably be drawn along multi-layered experiences of international migration, foreign country school settings, and digitally mediated distance learning as three sites of inequality that together shape the experiences of migrant schoolchildren. Furthermore, the multilevel structure of educational inequalities does not simply relate to migrant children and their families (micro-level) but is grounded in the institutional (school) system (meso-level) and a wider structural system of statewide educational policy (macro-level; see also Popyk et al., 2019). The latter defines how the “systems of reward, allocation of resources, and other elements of social selection, thus, operate to create and to maintain a class structure in science [and education] by providing a stratified distribution of chances” (Merton, 1988, p. 616) among children and their families.

Supporting this claim, research has consistently indicated that migrant children across European countries have significantly lower academic achievement than their native-born peers (Cebolla Boado, 2011; Darmody et al., 2014; Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Although the reasons behind this were correlated with lower economic status (Brewer and Haslum, 1986; Janta and Harte, 2016; Klasen, 1998), this disadvantage alone cannot account for educational gaps. Childhoods on the move are associated with vulnerability and disadvantaged positions in both social and educational contexts (Devine, 2009; Ensor and Goździak, 2016) wherein academic disadvantages result from emotional and psychological strains, insufficient cultural and language knowledge, and possible discrimination related to the migration process (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015; Sime et al., 2017). These are particularly profound when migration is associated with “negative motivations and connotations” (Sluzki, 1979, p. 381), such as escaping political instability or persecution, wars, or other life-threatening contexts (Ensor & Goździak, 2016).
Recent studies offer evidence that migrant children face multiple junctures during multifaceted and fractured “transnational transitions” (Pustułka and Trąbka, 2019). That is, migrant children’s adaptation periods and shifts between home and school environments are longer and more demanding, both for them and their families (Devine, 2009; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Compared to their non-migrant peers, migrant children typically start their social and cultural capital accumulation “from scratch” upon each relocation (Sime and Fox, 2015).

Crucially, for the learning process examined in this study, transnational migration causes interruptions in the educational process and broadly leads to significant learning losses and, ultimately, educational inequalities (Janta & Harte, 2016). It should be noted that for migrant children, academic setbacks take place not only after coming to the host country but also usually originate in the home country, during the “preparatory stage” of migration (Sluzki, 1979, p. 380).

The migration process anticipates post-migration adaptation, which Sluzki (1979) divided into three aspects: overcompensation, decompensation, and transgenerational impact (p. 380). During the overcompensation period, which can last weeks or even months, emigrants deal with extreme stress while trying to meet their basic survival needs. The decompensation period refers to the stress and struggles caused by the clash of the cultural norms and values of migrants with those of the new society. The post-migration adaption of migrant children concurs with receiving diminished support from parents, who spend most of their time solving post-migration quandaries, such as seeking legalization of their status, searching for accommodation, or generating regular income (Lareau, 2011). As a result, parents dedicate less time to supporting their children on a daily basis, which can have particularly detrimental consequences for the learning process. Moreover, the lack of parental support in children’s education is often driven by insufficient cultural capital (knowledge of the foreign language and culture, as well as lack of familiarity with local educational regulations) (Erel, 2012). Consequently, migrant children are often left alone to learn about the host country’s norms through testing and experiencing institutional and educational requirements. Thus, the functioning of the educational institutions (schools), they encounter has a tremendous bearing on macro-level inequalities.

Entwistle (1977) stated that school theoretically provides all students with equal chances, yet does not account for pre-existing intersectional differences. Hence, equal institutional resources do not result in equitable educational opportunities. Notably, the unequal chances of migrant children for education also rise when educational institutions cannot deliver equal educational opportunities (Darmody et al., 2014; Wang, 2008) or serve their primary functions due to functional changes or disturbed educational processes. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning have changed the educational practices and values of both institutions and migrant children (Popyk, 2021) and highlighted educational inequalities along with the growth of other social, economic, and health inequalities among disadvantaged groups (Lai and Widmar, 2021).

Migrant children are in an enduringly disadvantaged and strained position, which is often reflected in their academic performance. Children might experience learning difficulties during the transit period and shortly after arrival (International Organization for Migration, 2018); however, what makes education exclusion hard to capture
is that fractured transitions might last from a few days to a few years and often occur across several educational institutions and distinct country settings (Ensor and Goździak, 2016). Consequently, inequalities tend to accumulate and deepen over the life course (Dannefer, 2003; Klasen, 1998; Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Furthermore, there is growing interest in the situation of migrant children in Poland, with research tackling several themes. The main conceptual weakness still lies in the adoption of ethnic issues, in terms of looking at specific groups and their challenges. From a macro-level perspective, many studies have evaluated integration and education programs for migrants (Bleszyńska, 2010), including implementation of curriculum changes (Supreme Audit Office, 2020) aimed toward facilitating the learning process among growing groups of foreign minors (Kościółek, 2020). At the meso-level, there are indications that migration and even remigration to Poland expose children to discrimination at school (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015). Recently, data on migrant children’s experiences in Poland have been collected from their own perspectives (Kościółek, 2020; Popyk et al., 2019).

Educational Inequalities Exacerbated by the Digital Divide During the Pandemic

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Goldschmidt (2020) poignantly observed that computer and Internet access have become essential components of education. This is also the case in Poland, as the Polish Ministry of Education announced the shutdown of all educational institutions on March 12, 2020. Distance learning prevailed for the next year until March 17, 2021, with a 2-month offline education period in autumn.

Although the digital divide (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001) has primarily been studied in terms of Internet use and technical access to information and communication technologies (ICT), Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) clarified that digital access hinges upon having the financial means to possess certain digital equipment and receiving training that allows autonomous use of both hardware and software (see also DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001). With regard to the pandemic-induced home-bound lives Polish primary schoolchildren have lived since mid-March 2020, 99.3% of all families reported having Internet access at home (Statistics Poland, 2020), and there was no remarkable difference between native residents and first-generation migrants (Di Pietro et al., 2020). However, research conducted during the spring school shutdown in Poland simultaneously indicated that 18% of pupils had only “occasional access” and approximately 14% had no Internet access, effectively eliminating children’s chances to participate in online education (Parczewska, 2020). Buchner et al. (2020) demonstrated that technology/access-related problems were widespread: 87% of participants indicated that pupils had insufficient equipment, whereas 58% experienced problems with their Internet connection.

The above inconsistency is concurrent with the implications of online education indicated elsewhere and highlights many access/means barriers encountered by parents in less-privileged social settings (e.g., Lai and Widmar, 2021). Studies also indicate that immigrant children tend to have lower “techno-capital” (Ignatow and
Robinson, 2017) shaped by their “group’s disposition [or habitus], based in part on income disparities, but also education, cultural patterns, family trajectories, and the structure of opportunities” (Rojas et al., 2012, p. 225). In this first level of the digital divide, lacking access to high-speed Internet needed for completing school tasks is likely the cause of the “homework gap” (Alexander et al., 2007), which has become a significant mark of digital inequalities in the USA (Lai and Widmar, 2021).

Furthermore, without access, children’s below-baseline learning abilities for online schooling can translate to an increase in the pre-existing “learning gap” (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020). At this second-level context of skills beyond physical access, Ragnedda (2018) connected inequalities to digital capital resting on competencies such as digital literacy, communication, collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem-solving. Research on distance learning for children in Poland (Popyk, 2021) showed that migrant children find it challenging to process the educational material sent as homework, especially considering the low number of synchronous online lessons organized by public schools. This intersects with institutional disadvantages owing to pre-existing institutional weaknesses in schools frequented by those with lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gornik et al., 2020; Head, 2020).

While a significant drop in lesson time can lead to diminished subject knowledge and cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Grätz and Lipps, 2021), it may simultaneously result in increased individual learning time. Parczewska (2020) noted that, in relation to distance learning in spring 2020, 278 parent respondents generally indicated an upsurge in the time their children spent dedicated to homework. One-third of children spent 4 – 6 h per day completing assigned tasks, while one-fifth required more than 7 h per day. The effect of such a lengthy learning process is worth examining, especially because certain children and their parents have the insufficient digital and cultural capital to comply with this demand (see also Gornik et al., 2020; Popyk, 2021). For example, in the USA, it is forecasted that non-white children will have an estimated 12 – 16-month learning loss in mathematics by June 2021 (Dorn et al., 2020).

This is directly tied to the third and final level of the digital divide, which encompasses “inequalities in terms of benefits and tangible outcomes” (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2020, p. 3). Distance learning stresses the relationship between children’s cultural (Bourdieu, 1986) and digital capital (Ragnedda, 2018). Although typical shortages of migrant parents’ capital can normally be offset by capital conversions and the intervention of schools and institutions (Erel, 2012; Sime et al., 2017), this becomes impossible during lockdown, which greatly reduces direct support. Of the former multiple agents of the educational process—namely, children, parents, kin members, teachers, and other educational professionals—only the first two remain (see Lai and Widmar, 2021).

It can be argued that overlapping crises mean that the capacity to convert capital through an interplay of digital and offline (economic, social, cultural; Bourdieu, 1986) forms disappears, especially in immigrant families wherein cultural capital is already underdeveloped (Kościółek, 2020; Parczewska, 2020).
Materials and Methods

In this study, the data on the digital divide experienced during lockdown were derived from a broader qualitative research project on transnational transitions and socialization of migrant children in Poland. The project adhered to rigorous ethical standards and procedures for researching vulnerable groups such as migrants and children. The ethics committee at the implementing institution approved the project. All respondents were given information about the aim, study procedure, and dissemination strategies. Their anonymity and confidentiality were secured. Moreover, the researcher informed participants about their rights and personal data use (a detailed description of the research project can be found in the previous article, Popyk, 2021).

Data collection coincided with the Polish school shutdown in spring and summer 2020, requiring the use of online methods to interview 19 migrant schoolchildren (mean age = 12 years; 10 boys, 9 girls), their parents (n = 18; 15 women, 3 men), and teachers (n = 10; eight women, 2 men). Two children were siblings. The recruitment procedure consisted of two main stages: approaching the researcher’s personal contacts and subsequent snowball sampling. All respondents were sent an informed consent form, which was available in all study languages (Polish, English, Ukrainian, Russian, and Turkish). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the language of the participant’s choice, and their reflections on ICT and education during the pandemic were prominently featured in the interview guides and probes.

The main themes of the interviews were aligned across respondent groups and concerned children’s migration experiences and transitions from one country to another, with a focus on their (immediate and distant) family relations, school-based contact with teachers and peers, and out-of-school relationships and experiences. Furthermore, a portion of the interview covered children’s schedules, for example, the time dedicated to education and leisure in both (all) countries. A separate section was dedicated to the pandemic and explicitly covered the learning process, expectations for school/children/parents, social distancing effects, and family/peer relations during the pandemic.

Data analysis was conducted through meticulous transcription of recordings, followed by developing and applying codes to all interview transcripts, which included identification of themes and patterns and helped to create the codes. The interviews were coded using the MAXQDA software program. Data analysis relied on the principles of interpretivism (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 8 – 12) focused on tracking different levels of the digital divide and inequalities in the narratives of migrant children, their parents, and teachers in Poland. First, a data reduction phase included developing and applying codes to all material, identifying themes, patterns, and relationships concerning the created codes. The data were summarized with vignettes in phase two (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 81). Third, in creating data displays, thematically ordered approaches to data centered on education and acquired from different respondent groups (with the cross-theme of the pandemic) were employed and accompanied by conceptually...
ordered approaches related to educational challenges. This was followed by case-comparisons through multilevel extraction and cross-checks.

**Results**

This study contributes to the evidence that the cumulative educational disadvantage of migrant children originates in the migration experience, which results in multifaceted challenges (see also Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Ensor and Goździak, 2016) and fractured transnational transitions. The added value of the findings lies in including the digital divide revealed during COVID-19 distance learning. Figure 1 (Fig. 1 near here) shows how this exacerbates the effects of pre-existing inequalities.

**Migration-Driven Educational Inequalities**

The study data demonstrated that some migrant children start to experience educational hardships not only during the adaptation period in the host country but also long before coming to Poland. Of the 19 migrant families participating in the research, 10 families emigrated for political reasons. The “preparatory stage” of migration (Sluzki, 1979, p. 380) was a sudden and life-saving decision, which was followed by disruptions to the educational process.

This was conveyed in the stories of the respondents from Turkey, whose decision to emigrate was linked to political persecution after a purge in 2016. For a few months before fleeing their country, migrant children experienced psychological and emotional stress that prevented them from learning properly.

In her third year of schooling, at the age of 8, Amy left her country, relatives, school, and friends to start a new life in Poland. The post-migration adaptation took about a year, during which she could not perform well at school because of stress, lack of cultural knowledge, and an inability to communicate. Amy’s mother described her daughter’s first year after coming to Poland as extremely challenging:
She [Amy] was afraid and she was feeling nervous or excited, and she could not understand all the time, she didn’t feel as good as in Turkey. […] The first year, of course, we had some difficulties. Because of a new country, new friends, new teachers, everything was new. New language. (Azra, mother of a 12-year-old girl)

In addition, the cases of Nina and Amel, 12-year-old children from Turkey, demonstrated that the “decompensation” (Sluzki, 1979, p. 380) stage of post-migration adaptation can be extended to the situation of staying in transit countries. Before coming to Poland, children spent about 6 months in each of two other countries (see Table 1 for an overview of transit countries and schools). At every “pitstop,” they had to attend local schools and were initiated into the learning processes with new and distinct culture codes, social norms, and languages. Consequently, changes in the country, school, and lack of stability and security resulted in post-migration stress, meaning that migrant children faced hardships at school:

For the first three months, I went to a private school, [and] learning was in English. I did not like the school; it was very hard for me. I did not attend some of the lessons because I did not have good relationships with some
teachers, and my mother let me not go there. After school, I wanted to run back home immediately. (Marta, a 13-year-old girl)

Most respondents from all three groups (children, parents, and teachers) referred to the onerous post-migration adaptation process in Poland. The context is important here, as the relative recency of having to deal with non-native children means that the Polish educational system does not provide them with sufficient support in public schools. For example, children are not assigned to grades based on their skills or readiness, but rather are expected to “catch-up” and enter the age-appropriate grade:

Before coming to Poland, the child finished fifth grade. The teachers say: ‘Okay, go to school for one year just to study Polish’, and then when that one-year passes, the student just goes to sixth grade because that is where he or she left. (Derya, mother of an 11-year-old boy)

For this reason, some parents chose private schools for their children, believing that would help to ease the adaptation and learning processes via an individual approach and the greater presence of migrant children in private educational institutions. Ensuring rapid mastery of a foreign language (English being the language of instruction at private schools) was seen as key to adapting to the host society. Since children often attended language lessons instead of regular ones (e.g., history, science), this paradoxically meant learning losses across multiple subjects:

While we [new arrivals] were having English, they [classmates] were having history. I was having English with another teacher […] that was my beginning of learning English. (Harika, 11-year-old girl)

After a year of private education, four of the parent respondents decided that learning Polish faster was important and enrolled their children in public schools. Hence, these children underwent another transition, with a further year of adaptation dedicated to intensive language learning. Lisa described this process as follows:

When I first came to the new school, I almost did not know the language. First, I was just sitting and listening, doing nothing […] watching and copying my classmates. Sometimes, I asked them on the breaks or after classes to help me with homework. (Lisa, 12-year-old girl)

As a result, some migrant children lag behind their peers and have an estimated 2–3 years of learning loss in many subjects. The disadvantaged starting position and extensive educational setbacks during the adaptation period cumulate in the enduring educational disadvantages of migrant children (Darmody et al., 2014; Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Educational Inequalities Exacerbated by the Digital Divide During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Distance learning requires steady digital access and technological means for children and teachers (see also Buchner et al., 2020; Goldschmidt, 2020; Lai and
Not all migrant parents interviewed could equip each family member with a separate and adequate electronic device for learning. Spotlighting the first level of the digital divide, the variation at the inception of online schooling was particularly apparent. Three of the child interviewees initially took part in lessons using their smartphones. Initially, they did not find it uncomfortable because of the modest number of three to four weekly online lessons during distance learning in spring 2020; however, as more meetings accompanied by homework went by, problems regarding digital access emerged. The interviewed teachers specifically mentioned that migrant families often have unequal access to equipment. One teacher noted that migrant parents embrace the middle-class ideology of high engagement, yet she also saw insufficient technologies:

Parents, generally, were positive about distance learning and are trying to meet their needs. They tried to overcome all the technological challenges at their homes, like printers, computers, etc. [...] some parents complain that they cannot print something. In this situation, we tried to type the information into Word (a document) during our own private time. (Teacher 1, private school)

Another issue related to the first-level digital divide is directly linked to migrant families having to acquire new devices with meager resources available. Unlike in established middle-class households (e.g., Lareau, 2011), migrant families need to strategize with tighter resources. When the purchase concerns education, parents’ financial resources are incommensurate, and children’s savings are often used to solve the problem, hence overcoming the first-level digital divide. This was the case for Amir, a fifth-grader from Turkey, whose mother felt “forced” to buy him a laptop. Therefore, parents with limited capital must strategize to offset digital inequality through unplanned yet necessary investments in technology:

At first, it was really difficult, and I always thought it would end soon. Then, I realized that this [lockdown] will be for a long time, I searched on OLX and Allegro [shopping websites for used and new goods] for a cheap computer. With son’s money and my savings, we bought a computer and solved all our problems. (Eva, mother of an 11-year-old boy)

The pandemic-driven necessity to offer certain digital access autonomy fostered more independent Internet usage. In addition, technological challenges overlapped with spatial constraints, as having a device was not sufficient if the room setup could not mirror a classroom environment for learning. The quotation below demonstrates that the prolonged crisis ultimately prompted one family to move to a bigger flat:

[In the old apartment], he [son/Amir] had to do homework in the living room next to me, and I did not like listening to his teachers because it was not comfortable for them. [After the move] he has his own room. (Eva, mother of an 11-year-old boy)

Shifting to the second level of the digital divide rooted in skills, the main finding of the study pertains to the notable discrepancy between children attending
different types of schools (see also Buchner et al., 2020). Namely, immigrant children in private schools \((n=7)\) were in a much better situation than those in the public school system \((n=12)\) in Poland. As expected, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, private schools demonstrated higher institutional capital and organized more online lessons. Additionally, the teachers quickly started offering digital “office hours” for consulting with students online and guiding them through homework:

The education process looks as if nothing has changed. During the online lessons, we sit in front of the cameras. Then, you produce more information. And we have individual work when the material is given to children. While they work, the teachers stay available at the microphones with the camera turned off. We can explain the material if they need help. (Teacher 2, private school)

In contrast, public schools require more time to prepare for and adapt to a new form of education. Initially, the process focused on assigning homework asynchronously rather than synchronous online lessons:

First, I think that schools were not ready for distance learning. For a longer time, our school could not switch to this learning mode. A lot of topics from the subjects, especially the ones with several lessons per week, unfortunately, were not covered and explained at all. Children have had just one lesson on the subject per week, it was not enough. (Beyza, mother of a 12-year-old boy)

Migrant parents reported that there were only 3 − 4 lessons weekly compared to an average of 25 regular classes that would have normally taken place. Thus, children had to complete most learning tasks alone, acquiring new technical and digital skills along the way. Consequently, children from families with higher digital capital were more likely to perform better at school than those who had low “techno-capital” (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). For example, Ebru, who performed remote work on a computer before the pandemic, positively assessed distance learning as an occasion for her son to enrich his digital capital:

It’s a good opportunity for us, online classes […] He is interested in the Internet, and I am letting him use it, not social media but other digital tools […] He is searching for lots of things, he is trying to learn computer programs, for example, he now knows Google Sheets and Google Documents. He was watching the NASA spaceship. So, I am happy he is learning, [that] he wants to learn more through a computer. (Ebru, mother of an 11-year-old boy)

Thus, this research supports existing work on the negative impact of distance learning on the academic performance of already disadvantaged children. This shows that learning difficulties are caused less by limited technical access and more by insufficient digital capital. Digital shortcomings were observed for all three key agents in the learning process: institutions (schools), parents, and children. Together, they mirror the overlapping micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of educational inequalities (see Dannefer et al., 2018).
Educational Disadvantages During COVID-19 Pandemic Faced…

Educational inequality has also been noted due to the disparate use of the information given in school through digital sources. While teachers declared that they provided equal access to digital tools for education, children and parents complained about their challenges, indicating profound differences in cultural capital. During the pandemic, capital conversion has been largely hindered. The value of the most needed digital capital is severely weakened by inadequate language skills, which causes difficulty in comprehending homework tasks (in Polish or English):

For us, because it is a new school, a new language, this period of pandemic and online learning was even tougher. […] The school tried to organize the activities in such a way that they gave homework and tried to understand through the homework whether the child was up to date or not. The homework was huge indeed. And the kids don’t understand what homework is and what it is for, so they complained a lot. […] We couldn’t do all the homework, so we had to ask teachers for help or just shorten the number of tasks. (Leyla, mother of a 12-year-old boy)

Immigrant children appeared to be left behind in their learning duties despite parents’ engagement. Thus, it can be argued that the lockdown translated to at least one extra year of potential educational setbacks. Demonstrating the problem of migrant children not being able to share educational burdens with other socialization agents (see Popyk et al., 2019), pandemic-related quandaries in the learning process were often caused by the cessation of tutoring and private or compensatory lessons. The unavailability of tutors and educators because of pandemic-related restrictions meant that parents had no way of offsetting shortages in skills/capital and insufficient cultural resources. For example, Ema, a mother of a 12-year-old girl who attended public school, described her child’s learning during school closure as follows:

Before the quarantine, a tutor would come to our house to help my daughter with Polish and doing homework. But now, they cannot come and we have to cope ourselves. (Ema, mother of a 12-year-old girl)

It was observed that parents could not always provide educational assistance. Anastasia, a mother of two schoolchildren from Turkey, aged 10 and 13, noticed that children faced hardship with subjects that required advanced language skills that neither they nor their parents possessed, despite using various technologies to support the children’s learning. In particular, newly arrived migrant families face multiple challenges in processing learning material owing to their insufficient foreign language knowledge. Both children and parents (or even older siblings) seem overloaded with work, which might lead to weakened school values and demotivation toward learning (see Popyk, 2021):

She [daughter] always uses her sister’s help in doing math. The elder sister explains the material in Turkish first, then they do the task together so that they can send the homework to the teacher. When it comes to science and history, of course, she has a problem with understanding, as we all do. […] Usually,
we ask the teachers to send the tasks earlier, so we would be able to translate, explain, and learn. After that, we do the homework. Teachers usually help us when asked. However, if we do not ask them, they do not initiate support. (Anastasia, mother of two children, aged 10 and 13)

Research indicates that some parents are concerned that distanced education is insufficient for their children. Even in the early stage of the pandemic, it was clear that the summer holidays in 2020 could exacerbate the educational gap, separating children who receive educational support from those who are deprived of such help. The lack of such help is a cumulative effect of lacking digital and cultural capital among parents (micro-level) and the ill preparedness of schools (meso-level):

Frankly speaking, we did not have many online lessons in our school, so it’s hard to assess distance learning. But I think the ones we had are better than having none. Because children stayed at home with no obligations, besides, we have almost three months of summer holidays, it is too long to do nothing […] I think it’s bad and do not want it to be that way. We all hope that it’s just a transitional period, and children will go back to school. (Serife, mother of a 13-year-old girl)

Hence, distance learning is assessed as a rather negative factor that can lead to cumulative educational disadvantages among migrant children as a group that has not gained equitable access to education because of multilevel structures: macro (unprepared educational system in Poland), meso (insufficient school/teacher support), and micro (insufficient parental support).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study contributes to the literature on migrant children’s educational inequalities caused by transnational migration that have deepened due to COVID-19-related online learning. We found that the migrant children and their parents who participated in the study were largely unable to cope with the requirements of distance learning.

In a post-migration scenario already marked by stress, children are left behind by an educational system that was not only ill prepared for online learning in general (Buchner et al., 2020; Parczewska, 2020) but also particularly blind to the specific needs of migrants (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2015; Kościółek, 2020). Although the interviewed teachers wished to help, our interviewees received no institutional assistance from the schools specifically directed toward migrant children.

The digital divide and inequalities in cultural capital (particularly language) overlapped, meaning that distance learning during the 2020 lockdown caused educational setbacks and losses (see also Alexander & Condliffe, 2016; Dorn et al., 2020; Lai and Widmar, 2021). Given that the pandemic continues, distance learning will inadvertently incite enduring learning disadvantages that accumulate and reverberate in the educational inequalities observed among immigrant children in Poland.
Similar to young scientists who face the accumulation of disadvantages caused by their primarily lower position and lack of experience (Merton, 1968), migrant families fall victim to the stratification of life chances and experience hardships in acquiring desired positions, instead of being trapped in unfavorable educational lanes that have long-term consequences (Janta and Harte, 2016). Due to the multiple strains caused by the migration experience (Devine, 2009; Sime et al., 2017; Sluzki, 1979; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001) and low socio-economic status (Lareau, 2011), migrants are subject to intersectional vulnerability in social, economic, and cultural aspects (Crenshaw, 1991; Rinne et al., 2000). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that migrant children’s educational setbacks are not an individual issue, but rather a collective dilemma (Dannefer, 2003) of children from ethnic minorities (Dorn et al., 2020; Lai and Widmar, 2021).

Children who had been disadvantaged in their learning opportunities because of migration-related transition losses faced another academic obstacle caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning. Remote education has highlighted the digital divide (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001) on three levels (Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2020). First, home schooling requires families to provide the necessary digital access (e.g., stable Internet connection, proper devices: computer/laptop, printer, scanner). Second, distance learning tests the digital skills (of children, parents, and teachers) that are needed to process information and access educational material. Third, it demonstrates that digital (Ragnedda, 2018) and cultural capital (cultural, societal, and language knowledge; Bourdieu, 1986) must together form a backbone of proper learning processes during the lockdown. This applies to everyone: children, their parents, and teachers. The data show that neither parents and teachers nor schools can prevent the formation of cumulative disadvantages. Without the support of individuals and institutions equipped with locally bounded cultural capital, even the largest parental investments in digital capital will not be enough to safeguard migrant children’s learning process.

The learning gaps among migrant children are not a problem that can be solved at the family level, but rather resonate with the weaknesses of support across the multilevel structure (Dannefer et al., 2018). The study’s outcomes highlight that both institutional and parental assistance are key to upholding children’s learning process, with those deprived of it being likely to experience increasing learning losses. In this study, two-thirds of the child respondents was left with little help from parents or teachers.

Since the pandemic can, to an extent, be compared to the observations gathered in the context of out-of-school periods (vacation, holidays), the so-called summer learning shortfalls (Alexander & Condliffe, 2016) similarly increase between children from different backgrounds. Considering that children face greater learning gaps in the absence of school (e.g., during summer vacation; Alexander et al., 2007) or parents (Lareau, 2011), it can be concluded that a majority of the migrant children interviewees were 2–3 years behind their peers, and this disadvantage developed at different stages of migration (Sluzki, 1979). Children who attended schools in transitional countries or changed schools in Poland were marked by protracted educational setbacks exacerbated during distance learning.
Prevention of learning losses hinges upon concerted cultivation and parental engagement in out-of-school education (Lareau, 2011); thus, the adverse consequences of children’s educational setbacks can persist through and beyond high school (Alexander and Condliffe, 2016). Consequently, as the disadvantages tend to accumulate (Dannefer et al., 2018; Merton, 1988; Smyth & McCoy, 2009), migrant children are exposed to greater educational inequalities in times of distance learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Doyle, 2020; Popyk, 2021). Without policy interventions, this is likely to contribute to children from migrant families being more likely than their native-born peers to fall into the NEET category (not in education, employment, or training; Janta & Harte, 2016). Moreover, the prevailing educational disadvantages are likely to lead to social exclusion (Klasen, 1998) and stratification of future education and life chances (Merton, 1988).

Funding This work was funded by National Science Center of Poland under the grant number [2019/35/N/HS6/03682].

Data Availability Statement The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [Author 1], upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Alexander, K. L., & Condliffe, B. F. (2016). Summer setback in Baltimore: A review and update. In K. L. Alexander, S. Pitcock, & M. C. Boulay (Eds.), The Summer Slide: What We Know and Can Do About Summer Learning Loss (pp. 23–34). Columbia University.

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. American Sociological Review, 72(2), 167–180. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200202

Błeszyńska, K. (2010). Dzieci obcokrajowców w polskich placówkach oświatowych – perspektywa szkoły. Warsaw: Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.

Brewer, R. I., & Haslum, M. N. (1986). Ethnicity: The experience of socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 7(1), 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569860070102

Buchner, A., Majchrzak, M. & Wierzbicka, M. (2020). Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii. Raport z badań [Remote education during a pandemic. Research report]. Warsaw: Centrum Cyfrowe.

Cebolla Boado, H. (2011). Primary and secondary effects in the explanation of disadvantage in education: The children of immigrant families in France. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 32(3), 407–430. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.559341

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Dannefer, D. (2003). Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory. Journal of Gerontology, 58(6), 327–337. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/58.6.S327

Dannefer, D., Han, C., & Kelley, J. (2018). Beyond the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’ Generations, 42(4), 42–49.
Darmody, M., Byrne, D., & McGinnity, F. (2014). Cumulative disadvantage? Educational careers of migrant students in Irish secondary schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 17*(1), 129–151. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.674021

Devine, D. (2009). Mobilising capitals? Migrant children’s negotiation of their everyday lives in school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 30*(5), 521–535. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690903101023

DiMaggio, P. & Hargittai, E. (2001). *From the ‘digital divide’ to ‘digital inequality’: Studying internet use as penetration increases*. Working Paper, 47. Princeton University, School of Public and International Affairs, Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies.

Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J. & Viruleg, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help*. McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/ourinsights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help. Accessed 4 Jan 2021

Doyle, O. (2020). *COVID-19 exacerbating educational inequalities*. Public Policy.ie. Evidence for Policy. https://publicpolicy.ie/papers/covid-19-exacerbating-educational-inequalities/. Accessed 4 Jan 2021.

Ensor, M. O. & Goździak, E. M. (2016). Introduction: Durable solutions during transient years. In M. Ensor and E. Goździak (Eds.), *Children and forced migration. Durable Solutions During Transient Years* (pp. 1–21). Palgrave Macmillan.

Entwistle, H. (1977). *Class, culture and education* (Vol. 174). Routledge.

Erel, U. (2012). Engendering transnational space: Migrant mothers as cultural currency speculators. *European Journal of Women’s Studies, 19*(4), 460–474. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812466612

Goldschmidt, K. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Technology use to support the wellbeing of children. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing, 53*(July), 88–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2020.04.013

Gornik, B., Dežan, L., Sedmak, M., & Medarić, Z. (2020). Distance learning in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reproduction of social inequality in the case of migrant children. *Družboslovne Razprave, 36* (94–95), 149–168. https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.40

Grätz, M. & Lipps, O. (2021). Large loss in studying time during the closure of schools in Switzerland in 2020. Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 71. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100554

Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H., Grzymała-Moszczyńska, J., Durlik, J. & Szydłowska, P. (2015). *(Nie)łatwe powroty do domu? Funkcjonowanie dzieci i młodzieży powracających z emigracji [(Un) easy homecoming? Functioning of children and adolescents returning from emigration]*. Warsaw: Foundatio of Bronisław Geremka.

Head, E. (2020). Digital technologies and parental involvement in education: The experiences of mothers of primary school-aged children. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 41*(5), 593–607. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1776594

Ignatow, G., & Robinson, L. (2017). Pierre Bourdieu: Theorizing the digital. *Information, Communication and Society, 20*(7), 950–966. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301519

International Organization for Migration UN Migration. (2018). *Addressing the needs of migrant children*. Department of Migration Management.

Janta, B. & Harte, E. (2016). *Education of migrant children: Education policy responses for the inclusion of migrant children in Europe*. RAND Corporation

Kaczmarczyk, P. (2015). *Burden or relief? Fiscal impacts of recent Ukrainian migration to Poland*. Discussion Paper, 8779. IZA: Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit Institute for the Study of Labor.

Klasen, S. (1998). *Social exclusion and children in OECD countries: Some conceptual issues*. University of Munich.

Kościółek, J. (2020). Children with migration backgrounds in Polish Schools problems and challenges. *Annales. Series Historia Naturalis, 30*(4), 601–612. https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.40

Lai, J., & Widmar, N. O. (2021). Revisiting the digital divide in the COVID-19 era. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 43*(1), 458–464. https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13104

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods—class, race, and family life, with an update a decade later* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Merton, R. K. (1968). The Matthew effect in science. *Science, 159*(3810), 56–63. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56

Merton, R. K. (1988). The Matthew effect in science, II: Cumulative advantage and the symbolism of intellectual property. *Isis, 79*(4), 606–623. https://doi.org/10.1086/354848
Migration Statistics (Migracje.gov.pl). (2021). Poland: comparison of years 2010/2020. https://migracje.gov.pl/en/statistics/scope/poland/type/statuses/view/charts/year/2010/year2/2020. Accessed 4 Jan 2021.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed). SAGE Publications.

Office for Foreigners. (2021). Annual report – legalization of stay: Figures for proceedings against foreigners in the first half of 2021.

Orellana, M. F., Thorne, B., Chee, A., & Lam, W. S. E. (2001). Transnational childhoods: The participation of children in processes of family migration. *Social Problems, 48*(4), 572–591. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2001.48.4.572

Parczewska, T. (2020). Difficult situations and ways of coping with them in the experiences of parents homeschooling their children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. *Education, 3–13, 49* (7), 889–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2020.1812689

Di Pietro, G., Biagi, F., Costa, P., Karpiński, Z. & Mazza, J. (2020). *The likely impact of COVID-19 on education: Reflections based on the existing literature and recent international datasets*. Publication Office of the European Union

Popyk, A. (2021). The impact of distance learning on the social practices of schoolchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic: Reconstructing values of migrant children in Poland. *European Societies, 23*, 530–544. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1831038

Popyk, A., Pustułka, P., & Trąbka, A. (2019). Theorizing belonging of migrant children and youth at a meso-level. *Studia Migracyjne - Przegląd Polonijny, 171*(1), 235–255. https://doi.org/10.4467/25449472smpp.19.011.10261

Pustułka, P., & Trąbka, A. (2019). New directions in researching migration of children and youth. *Studia Migracyjne - Przegląd Polonijny, 171*(1), 11–21. https://doi.org/10.4467/25449472smpp.19.012.10270

Rag more, M. & Ruiu, M. L. (2020). *Digital capital: A Bourdieusian perspective on the digital divide*. United Kingdom, North America, Japan, India, Malaysia, China: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Rag nedda, M. (2018). Conceptualizing digital capital. *Telematics and Informatics, 35*(8), 2366–2375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.10.006

Rinne, R., Kiviruuma, J., Hirvenoja, P., & Simola, H. (2000). Finland: From Comprehensive School Citizen towards Self-Selective Individual. In S. Lindblad, & T. S. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Public discourses on education governance and social integration and exclusion: Analyses of policy texts in European contexts* (pp. 25-54). (Uppsala Reports on Education; No. 36). Uppsala university, Department of Education.

Rojas, V., Straubhaar, J., Spence, J., Roychowdhury, D., Okur, O., Pinon, J., & Fuentes, M. (2012). Communities, cultural capital, and digital inclusion: Ten years of tracking techno-dispositions and techno-capital. In J. Straubhaar, J. Spence, Z. Tufekci, & R. Lentz (Eds.), *Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class, Gender, and the Digital Divide in Austin* (pp. 223–264). University of Texas Press.

Sime, D., Fassetta, G., & McClung, M. (2017). ‘It’s good enough that our children are accepted’: Roma mothers’ views of children’s education post-migration. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 39*(3), 316–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1343125

Sime, D., & Fox, R. (2015). Migrant children, social capital and access to services post-migration: Transitions, negotiations and complex agencies. *Children and Society, 29*(6), 524–534. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12092

Sluzki, C. E. (1979). Migration and family conflict. *Family Process, 18*(4), 379–390. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1979.00379.x

Smyth, E. & McCoy, S. (2009). *Investing in education*. ESRI Research Series, 6. The Economic and Social Research Institute.

Statistics Poland. (2020). *GUS*. Information society in Poland in 2020.

Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Harvard University Press.

Supreme Audit Office [Najwyższa Izba Kontroli]. (2020). *NIK o kształceniu dzieci cudzoziemców i obywateli polskich powracających do kraju - Najwyższa Izba Kontroli [NIK on education of children of foreigners and Polish citizens returning to the country - Supreme Audit Office].* Department of Science, Education and National Heritage.

Wang, L. (2008). The marginality of migrant children in the urban Chinese educational system. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 29*(6), 691–703. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802423361
Publisher's Note  Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.