

Ukrainian children, youth, and parents in the Danish public school - needs, wishes, and lessons learned two years after the big arrival

Summary

By the first week of April 2024, approximately 14.000 Ukrainian minors have been granted protection under *the law on temporary residence permits for displaced persons from Ukraine (the Special Act)*. Currently, many of them and their families are in a period of re-orientation. An increasing number of Ukrainians no longer believe that the war will end soon, and that impacts their plans for the future and their motivation to remain in Denmark. Some return to Ukraine, others remain, some get divorced, while more are bringing their family to Denmark and increasingly see their future here. These trends also influence the Ukrainian families and their children's engagement at school, which in turn impacts the work of teachers and municipal employees.

The report summarized here describes the work and the current experiences employees in the public school system are having with the Ukrainian children and their families. Additionally, it describes the current challenges, including those regarding vulnerable children. Furthermore, it describes what has worked well in relation to the Ukrainian children, youth, and their families. It also outlines the schools' needs and wishes in order to ensure the best outcome looking forward.

The report is based on a literature study and interviews with schoolteachers and -staff as well as other employees in five municipalities in Denmark. The data also includes input from three panel-dialogues held with displaced Ukrainians across Denmark. The study and report have been made by Knowledge Center for Vulnerable Refugees (Center for Udsatte Flygtninge) in DRC Danish Refugee Council.

The Danish municipalities organized the reception of the Ukrainian refugees differently and made varying use of the liberties or flexibilities granted through the Special Act, and it is also diverse challenges that the schools currently face.

The interviewed schoolteachers and municipal employees speak of a general sense of improved wellbeing and motivation to learn Danish for the younger children. For the older children, aged 12-16, wellbeing varies greatly. Currently, the schools are challenged by the large transfer of children from reception classes to the ordinary classes in the public school system, herein weak Danish language skills and issues with behavior and illbeing.¹

Need for long-term planning and durable strategies including a path for integration

In 2022, the reception of the displaced Ukrainians was organized with a short-term perspective – assuming the war would end soon. As such, the Ukrainians were granted relatively short and temporary protection under the Special Act. Now that their stay is likely of a longer duration, schools highlight a need for a more durable strategy in municipalities, which should include an integration perspective. Some teachers and headmasters experience uncertainty about the organization of efforts in the long-term and regarding initiatives aimed at addressing the behavioral challenges and psychosocial needs of children.

¹ Reception classes in Danish: *Modtageklasser*, which are special classes for newcomers. The classes are usually placed at and run by ordinary public schools and are as such part of the public school system. Municipalities are allowed – but not required – to teach children, who arrive to Denmark, in the so-called reception classes for two years before they must enter into ordinary classes.

Many Ukrainians too have considered their stay in Denmark temporary, with the hopes of a swift return to Ukraine, which has contributed to high absence rates, low motivation, and slow Danish language learning. Two years later, many Ukrainians hope for a more long-term residence permit, and feel negatively impacted by the uncertainty surrounding their temporary status. Additionally, many parents, children, and youths are lagging behind when it comes to Danish language learning and inclusion in society while struggling with their mental health and wellbeing.

Cultural encounters between the Ukrainian and Danish educational systems

The encounter between different school systems and experiences at school has played a significant part of the municipal employees' work with the Ukrainian children. Just as there is a need to convey the Danish school and health care system to newly arrived Ukrainians, teachers also need to acquire knowledge about the Ukrainian context to support newly arrived children and youth in the best way. Here, dialogue and curiosity are crucial. It is also important to understand how violence, economic instability, and insecurity since 2014 has impacted many families in the Eastern Ukraine. Thus, some Ukrainian children are dealing with psychosocial issues, that might be further amplified by their current situation in exile.

Many schools experience that the Ukrainian children can be very tough with one another, and that it requires different methods to resolve the conflicts than usual. While Ukrainian teachers are an important resource in these cases, given that they can react to verbal bullying in Ukrainian, even they can feel overwhelmed and struggle with facilitating discussions and conflict resolution with the parents.

The Ukrainian school system is largely built up around frequent testing, memorization and formal relations between teacher and student. And it does not prioritize dialogue between parents and teacher concerning the child's wellbeing in the same way as in Denmark. Several schools experience Ukrainian parents who do not necessarily share relevant information about the child, and that they hesitate to ask the teacher for advice. Likewise, the children are also reluctant to seek help in relation to academic or socially related issues. In effect, this can manifest during exams at the end of the term, where older children get surprised by the different exam types and requirements that are higher than they anticipate. Hence, teachers see many attempts at cheating.

Some Ukrainian parents have previous experiences stipulating that it is important to maintain a façade when interacting with the school- and healthcare system. In Ukraine, it can be a legitimate way of protecting your child against prejudice, differential treatment, or social distancing. However, in Denmark there is the expectation that parents are transparent regarding their child's health and behavioral patterns, in order for schools to provide and initiate the right support. In this cultural encounter, it remains important that teachers trust their professional intuition and prioritize building trust with the Ukrainian parents to ensure their cooperation and inclusion in the school system.

Support to vulnerable children leaves much to be desired

The schools have other challenges when it comes to ensuring the right support to particularly vulnerable Ukrainian children and youth in school. Unfortunately, there are several examples of Ukrainian children with severe ill-being or possible diagnoses, who are not receiving the proper support. Teachers often find themselves alone with tasks for which professional help is required. When a teacher files a report of concern or contacts the Educational Psychological Counselling Teams,² the schools experience a longer period of waiting for interventions to be initiated with Ukrainian children than with Danish children. Some interviewees highlight cases of Ukrainian children showing clear signs of ill-health and potentially a mental health diagnosis, but who are not assessed nor receiving support.

² In Danish: Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning (PPR)

The delayed reactions to such issues may be a question of lack of resources and skills, or it may be related to the fact that some municipalities await initiating certain types of targeted psycho-social support until the child of concern is transferred to an ordinary class, which may be located at another school than the reception class. Efforts are further complicated by some Ukrainian parents' distrust of psychiatry and lack of transparency regarding their children's well-being, health, or diagnosis.

Potentially problematic alcohol consumption

Abuse of alcohol is perceived as an issue among some Ukrainians housed in temporary accommodation and among vulnerable families. Children, whose parents do not drink excessively, might still be affected by adults with problematic alcohol consumption, if they live in the same shared accommodation. Additionally, the schools have experiences regarding a 'party culture' among some of the older children resulting in situations where they end up lying in school or to their parents. They emphasize that it should also be seen in relation to the families' housing conditions, where many have lived closely together with other families in very little space for a relatively long time. Here, there may be a need for some families to move into their own housing.

The good experiences and positive feedback

There are also many initiatives that the schools have had success with, and which has made a positive difference in their work with the Ukrainian children. This includes the liberties and flexibilities made available through the Special Act, such as the possibility of having two teachers per class, exclusively Ukrainian reception classes with mixed teaching in Danish and Ukrainian, the employment of Ukrainian educators and teachers with strong pedagogical qualifications, and the possibility to teach in a reduced range of subjects.

Strong cross-sectoral cooperation in the municipality and an existing municipal integration department (having been maintained since the arrival of the many Syrian refugees) are also seen as an invaluable resource to draw from as a team. In the municipalities, where this has been the setup, it has contributed significantly to a good reception of the Ukrainians. In addition, several teachers speak of the positive experiences with MindSpring-courses for Ukrainian children and youth. MindSpring is a psychosocial group programme for refugees covering various themes such as trauma, stress, and identity in exile.

Finally, there are several positive experiences from initiatives or everyday practices prioritizing the building of trust between the school and the Ukrainian parents. One example being a teacher who sets aside time before the beginning of the first class of the day for Ukrainian parents to ask questions either in English or using Google Translate.

Many teachers experience that Ukrainians over time have gained a better understanding of the Danish school system (in terms of didactics, pedagogy, and school-home collaboration) and have positively embraced it.

What the schools need now and looking ahead

During the interviews, the municipal employees express several wishes for initiatives that can improve their work with Ukrainian children looking forward, and that are also supported by this study and by DRC's extensive experience and knowledge.

These wishes include:

- Planning at the municipal level with a more long-term perspective, which also includes an integration track for Ukrainians' potentially longer stay in Denmark as well as pathways to education.

- Strengthened cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation between municipal actors – including improved communication and clearer division of responsibilities, especially in working with vulnerable children, youth, and families. Furthermore, ensuring resources and skills to react faster in case of special needs.
- Further education or competence building of employees in supporting vulnerable children and youth with a refugee background – especially for teachers in the ordinary public school system and staff among the Educational Psychological Counselling Teams.
- Employment of a sufficient number of teachers with competencies in Danish as a second language (DSL), and in general, more resources to ensure sufficient capacity and strengthening of offers within DSL education.
- Focus on strengthening access to leisure activities for children and youth.
- Ensuring psychosocial support for children and youth with special needs – for example, by offering MindSpring programs or similar.