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Educational assistance for Ukrainian refugee children and youth – a current multidimensional reality

Introduction

The world's natural resources are not equally distributed. They have been and will undoubtedly continue to be a source of violent conflicts between societies and individuals, as will the division of spheres of influence. Education for peace, tolerance, intercultural understanding, and, fundamentally, education in the spirit of the universal and inseparable nature of human rights constitute the major path to preventing and smoothing conflicts. The world's needs depend on recognizing the natural right to life of every human being and fostering respect for every person.

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, one of its neighbors to the southwest. Early reports declared it the largest conventional warfare operation in Europe since World War II. It marked a major escalation between the countries, which had been in conflict since 2014. Following the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and Russian-backed separatist forces seized part of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine, leading to an eight-year war in the region (*Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, 2022).

Currently, the most affected areas by the war remain the Eastern, South, and Central regions of Ukraine. The war triggered one of the fastest-growing displacement and humanitarian crises on record, pushing millions into internal displacement and forcing many others abroad to neighboring EU countries in search of safety.

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Moldova is a neighboring country of Ukraine, with a 1.222 km common border (European Commission, 2018). According to UNICEF data from 8 June 2022, more than 400.000 Ukrainian refugees entered Moldova, of whom 160.000 were children of all ages (UNICEF, 2022).

According to data from the government of Moldova, the state ensured access to education for children from Ukrainian refugee families based on the request of the official parent or legal representative. Due to the fact that the Ukrainian authorities facilitate and encourage the continuation of online education for refugee children in Ukrainian educational institutions, the authorities, together with development partners and international donors, have ensured free access to the Internet in the refugee centers for all placed refugees. Moreover, in more than 10 refugee centers in the Republic of Moldova with more children, classrooms were created and equipped with computers and furniture, allowing children to play or engage in recreational activities during the summer or to study during classes.

Moreover, during the summer vacation, with the joint effort of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) and the support of external partners, over 1,000 refugee children attended 40 summer camps in the country, which facilitated their psycho-emotional and social inclusion in the new culture.

As UNFPA's (*United Nations Population Fund*) study on the schooling situation conducted in 5 localities reveals, at the beginning of the school year (July-August 2022), 40% of Ukrainian parents preferred their children to continue studies online within the Ukrainian educational system, 32,5% wanted to integrate their children into the Moldovan education system, and 25% were indecisive about what they would do. One of the reasons for their indecisiveness was that the parents were not informed about the possibility of schooling in the national institutions since there were insufficient counseling services and a lack of information regarding the educational institutions to which parents could apply. In most cases, parents were searching for the information online by themselves, without any guidance. One of the reasons for this misinformation is the fact that there is no synergy in collaboration and clear delimitation of responsibilities between educational and social protection actors, with each assuming that it is the other's responsibility of another one to inform parents about schooling.

Also, due to the fact that the national education regulations issued in May 2022 allowed the refugee children to participate only as listeners, and also the fact that there is no current agreement between the Moldovan and Ukrainian Ministries of Education to validate the Moldovan education studies after returning back to Ukraine, some refugee parents do not trust the education system of Moldova and prefer studying online in their Ukrainian schools.

It is known that war has lasting effects on children and adolescents. The refugees from Ukraine have socio-psychological and emotional trauma. The most affected are children. As they leave their country, their fathers and brothers remain behind to defend it. They are also separated from their friends and other members of the family.

The children are traumatized by the uncertainty and fear of the war. The Ukrainian women are in despair as they lost their homes and their jobs.

Methodology

As a result, the Republic of Moldova faced many Ukrainian refugees, including children and young people. To help children and young refugees from the Republic of Moldova, the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation (PCF) and Swiss Solidarity Foundation initiated a project called *Psychological and Educational Assistance Project for Ukrainian Refugee Children and Youth*, implemented in 8 regions of the Republic of Moldova (in which I participated as an expert and trainer for teachers).

The research aimed to establish the factors that ensure the successful integration of refugee children and young people into the national socio-cultural environment.

The objective of the specific needs assessment was to identify the needs of refugees from 9 communities of the Republic of Moldova, where PCF intends or continues to be active, to successfully integrate refugee children and young people into the national socio-cultural environment.

According to the established purpose and objective, the following research problem was formulated: *What factors determine the successful integration of refugee children and young people into the national socio-cultural environment?*

Data collection methods and tools include analysis and synthesis of the normative-legislative framework, as well as updated information on the issue of humanitarian, psychological, and educational assistance for Ukrainian refugee children and youth surveying focus groups (local coordinators, psychologists, teachers, parents, children, and youth) and interviews.

Results

In the article, we highlight some dimensions from the research conducted in 2022 and reflect the results obtained on the indicators focused on psychological and educational aspects. As respondents, we selected parents (52 persons) and refugee children and youth (31 persons).

The results obtained during the implementation of the questionnaire applied to refugee parents from Ukraine are the following.

Indicator: *Emotional state of the refugees.*

From the refugees' responses, we found that they manifest such states and emotions as anxiety, irritation, sadness, insecurity, stress, restlessness for relatives, confusion, and physical weakness. The Ukrainian refugees also reported the following: "the desire to return home,"; "a depressed state due to the ongoing situation because of what is happening in Ukraine," and "it is very difficult for me; my relatives are in Ukraine."

Indicator: Emotional state of the Ukrainian refugee children and youth.

Based on the parents' responses answers of the parents, we determined that the children and young people manifest such states and emotions as anxiety, stress, irritation, sadness, insecurity, depression, and nervousness. On the other hand, several parents emphasized that their children feel good, balanced, and cheerful in the Republic of Moldova.

- The refugees also mentioned that:
- "My son has a disability (cerebral palsy) aged 21; he is depressed";
- "Everybody wants to return home";
- "We regret that we had to leave our home";
- "My son is depressed because we were planning to go home, and nothing has changed yet."

Indicator: Activities that would contribute to the well-being of Ukrainian refugee children.

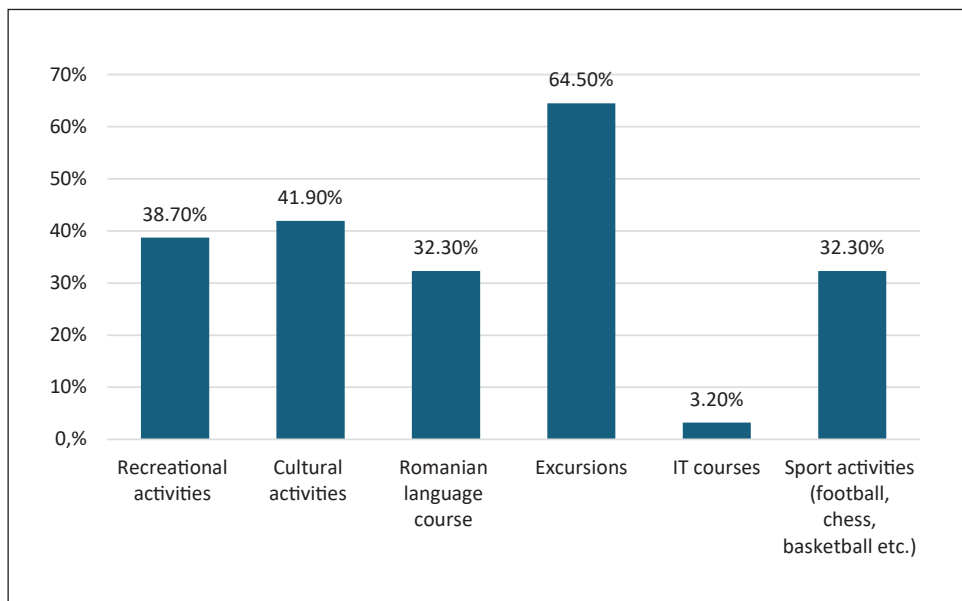
According to the data, the most appropriate activities would be trips (53.80%), Romanian language courses (26.90%), participation in creative centers, such as theater, choir, and dance (23.10%), recreational activities organized in collaboration with parents, with the psychologist, or the teacher (21.20%), psychotherapeutic sessions with the psychologist (21.20%), recreational activities with the teacher (5.80%).

Indicator: Taking care of children with special education needs.

According to the data, 11.50% of respondents have a child or youth with special educational needs in their care.

The results obtained during the implementation of the questionnaire administered to children and young refugees from Ukraine are reflected below.

Figure 1. Activities preferred by young refugees



Indicator: *Activities that are interesting to children and youth.*

In the context of sociological and psychological studies, the data suggest a major interest of refugee children and youth in activities that involve mobility and fun, such as trips and visits (64.50%). These preferences can be interpreted in the context of the need to escape from the stressful and traumatic reality that these young people live, given that experiences of refuge are often accompanied by fear, instability, and significant losses. Excursions can provide an opportunity to relax and recharge the mental batteries, thus helping to reduce stress and anxiety.

Likewise, the relatively high weight given to cultural (41.90%) and recreational (38.70%) activities suggests an openness to integration into the new society and the exploration of new forms of cultural expression, both for social integration and the development of a sense of belonging.

Interest in Romanian language courses and sports activities (32.30%) suggests a desire to adapt to life in the Republic of Moldova and build long-term relationships. Sports, for example, can be an effective way to overcome language barriers and build teams. In contrast, language learning helps to integrate more effectively in schools, the labor market, and everyday life.

Indicator: *Children's safety in the school environment.*

According to the data, 71% of children feel safe at school, and 5.50% of respondents stated that they do not feel safe, because they meet difficulties integrating into their new schools.

Indicator: *Doing homework.*

According to the results, 48.40% of children need assistance with their homework (the requested subjects are Romanian and English), and 45.20% of respondents answered that they do not need help.

Indicator: *School subjects in which Ukrainian refugee children and youth need support.*

We find that the respondents need support predominantly in school subjects, such as foreign language (English) (19.40%), Mathematics (19.40%), Romanian language and literature, and Russian language and literature (6.50%).

Indicator: *Studying based on the adapted educational program, developed according to children's needs.*

According to the data, 64.60% of children mentioned that they are supported and encouraged to learn according to a program adapted to their needs. However, 12.90% of children mentioned that they do not have an individualized educational plan to meet their needs, and support helps them address their learning issues.

Indicator: *School and community activities.*

The refugee children and youth would like to participate in and engage in activities such as music, football, basketball, rowing, volleyball, tennis, chess, craft or creative workshops, robotics, painting, dance, art school classes, language classes, and music school (guitar) lessons.

Psycho-educational approaches

In response to the created situation, in addition to other supporting activities corresponding to aligned with the established indicators (such as necessary goods, information services for parents, etc.), we have developed a guide for teachers, presenting educational activities that would contribute to establishing the well-being of refugee children and youth. At the same time, there were organized training sessions with teachers to apply the guide for refugee children and youth.

It was necessary to organize activities for refugee children and young people that would contribute to improving their well-being, and psychological balance, based on their individual gender needs:

- psycho-therapeutic sessions with the psychologist or psychotherapist;
- recreational activities with the teacher;
- recreational activities organized in collaboration with parents, the psychologist, and the teacher;
- offering opportunities to participate in creative centers, such as theatre, choir, dance, etc.;
- cultural socialization activities and excursions;
- participating in Romanian language courses, which provide information related to online safety, cyberbullying, gender stereotypes, gender violence, ways to cope with them, etc.

We emphasize that various ways can be achieved to develop the young generation's personality through the development of social, affective, cognitive, verbal, and motor behavior. Recreational activities play a special role in this regard. Through them, the young generation learns to independently and efficiently organize their free time, develops their skills of cultured communication and civilized behavior, and acquires skills for building relationships and integrating into society.

Essentially, the study and the activities organized imply reflection and action, positively conditioning the approach to integrating children and young refugees of preschool and early school age, preadolescents, and adolescents in the socio-cultural environment of the Republic of Moldova. This methodological guide aims to answer the question of how the host country can involve these children and young people in "their own lives" and make them feel safe.

Conceived as a methodological guide, the study offers concrete, practical support, first of all, to the teachers participating in the humanitarian, psychological, and educational assistance project for Ukrainian refugee children and youth from the Republic of Moldova. Also, through the content it promotes, the study is intended to be helpful to the general public specialized in education, teachers, psychologists, parents, and all those interested in recreational activities (fun activities, excursions, visits, etc.) and guided by the desire to fully develop the personality of the younger generation.

In the first part, the methodological guide includes recreational sessions focusing mainly on playful activities and games (socialization games, creative games, movement games, musical games, etc.). Each recreational session reflects the related competencies, name, detailed description of the activities, and some methodological

suggestions. The recreational sessions also include a list of teaching materials, most of which one probably already has on hand.

The second part of the methodological guide includes several sessions related to trips and visits as a form of education and recreation. Excursions are explained and structured to stimulate curiosity, the spirit of investigation, imagination, creative thinking, and creating one's well-being.

The contents of the methodological guide are focused on:

- developing interests and emotions, establishing the affective bond between peers, between the young generation and newcomers, and between the members of the community they belong to;
- fostering a sense of belonging and collegiality as part of the group;
- developing self-esteem and respect for the poor;
- teaching courage and will;
- active and empathetic listening;
- solving problems through cooperation;
- developing independence, autonomy, and self-control;
- teaching responsibility;
- strengthening perseverance;
- emotional self-regulation;
- training the skill to control and manage one's emotions in front of an audience;
- development of thinking, memory, imagination, and creativity;
- educating team spirit through integration and active participation.

To function effectively in the social sphere, the young generation must learn to integrate, adapt, and respond adequately to all social and global situations to reconcile their own needs and expectations with those of others. The recreational sessions offered in this methodological guide can, therefore, be initiated not only by the teachers involved in the project but also by parents. It is encouraged to use them to develop one's relationship with the younger generation and help them understand the world and people around them, as well as enjoy the time of growing and developing together.

Summary and conclusions

The activities started within the project on educational assistance for refugee children and youth in Ukraine involved a multidimensional approach. They were based on providing psychological and educational support, focusing on the principles of peace education, and fostering respect among people to better understand conflicts, reduce the likelihood of violent conflicts breaking out, and develop capacities to transform potentially dangerous situations into peaceful ones.

Based on the needs assessment results, to reduce the Ukrainian refugee crisis and successfully integrate the Ukrainian refugee children and youth in the Republic of Moldova, we recommend implementing projects to support the Ukrainian refugees in various areas of the Republic of Moldova, which have an impressive number of Ukrainian refugees and where humanitarian intervention is required.

Education for peace and cooperation was the motto of the project, and the organized activities contributed to the formation and cultivation of skills and civic attitudes to approach social problems through dialogue and effective participation in the pedagogical resolution of both objective and subjective contradictions that appear in the context of a (micro-) group or within the social community (such as professional, economic, political, cultural, or religious), at national, regional, and local levels.

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine triggered one of the fastest-growing displacement and humanitarian crises on record, pushing millions into internal displacement and abroad to neighboring EU countries in search of safety. According to the study conducted, the most affected areas in the Republic of Moldova, with an impressive number of Ukrainian refugees, where humanitarian intervention is required, are those on the border with Ukraine. The most affected are children and women. The safety and well-being of children are a major concern in the context of armed conflict, as they are often among the most vulnerable to the psychological and social impact of war. Separation from family and friends becomes a painful reality for many children who leave their homeland while their fathers or brothers stay behind to defend it. This dislocation generates

intense feelings of loss and uprooting, amplifying emotional stress. In addition, the uncertainty about the future and the constant fear of violence contribute to the development of deep trauma, which can have a long-term impact on children's mental health and their ability to adapt. From a psychological perspective, these children and youth are at increased risk of developing anxiety disorders, depression, or post-traumatic stress, being affected by the instability of the environment and the feeling of insecurity. Separation from loved ones and loss of essential social connections diminish the sense of safety and belonging, critical factors for harmonious development. Socially, breaking away from the community of origin and integrating into a new environment can generate additional difficulties. Refugee children may encounter language, cultural, or educational barriers, which affect their adaptation and social development. In this context, it becomes essential to implement psychosocial support measures, which include counseling, inclusive educational programs, and initiatives to rebuild the sense of belonging and stability. The article explores the multidimensional impact of war on children, highlighting the need for integrated and personalized approaches to support their resilience and facilitate their social and emotional integration. It also highlights key research dimensions for successfully integrating refugee children and young people into the national socio-cultural environment. The results of the indicators associated with psychological and educational aspects are analyzed. Based on the needs assessment, activities were organized for refugee children and young people that would contribute to improving their well-being and psychological balance. These activities included: psycho-therapeutic sessions with the psychologist; recreational activities with the teacher; and recreational activities organized in collaboration with parents, the psychologist, and the teacher; opportunities to participate in creative centers (theatre, choir, dance, etc.); cultural socialization activities; excursions; participation in Romanian language courses; information on online safety, cyberbullying, gender stereotypes, and gender violence, as well as the ways to cope with them.

Keywords: educational assistance, refugees, inclusive education, education for peace, conflict, social integration, well-being

