



Supporting the social and emotional well-being of refugee students from Ukraine in host countries

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Key messages

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the largest forced displacement crisis in recent history, with a high proportion of those fleeing being children and young people.
- Many Ukrainian children and young people will have endured stressful and/or traumatic experiences, before leaving Ukraine and throughout their migration journey. They may also encounter a range of challenges in adjusting to life in their host country. These experiences can lead to a variety of mental health issues.
- The longer-term impact of what children and young people may have experienced before, during and after fleeing Ukraine is dependent on the psychosocial support they receive in their host country. Schools play a vital role in addressing refugee learners' needs and in promoting their social and emotional learning and well-being. This is an essential component of ensuring their inclusion in education and in society as a whole.

Background and key issues

Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine has resulted in the largest forced displacement crisis in recent history with nearly one-third of Ukrainians having had to flee their homes (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe, 2022^[1]). As of 16 November 2022, there were over 7.8 million refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe (UNCHR Operational Data Portal, 2022^[2]). A high proportion are children and young people (OECD, 2022^[3]): the number of children and adolescents arriving in Europe has been recognised as being “unprecedented in its scale in such a short time span” (European Commission, 2022^[4]).

Many Ukrainian children and young people will have witnessed violence and destruction, been separated from or suffered the loss of family members and friends, and/or have experienced other traumatic events, both in Ukraine and during their migration journey (Cerna, 2019^[5]; Smith Jervelund and Krasnik, 2022^[6]; European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). Upon arriving in their host country, they may also have faced a variety of challenges associated with the complexities of navigating their post-migration environment, such as discrimination and reconfigured family life (Cerna, 2019^[5]). These experiences can provoke feelings of grief, despair, anger and guilt, and can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, sleep disturbance, or depression (Gonçalves Júnior et al., 2022^[8]). Previous research shows that, in comparison to host country populations, refugees report a higher prevalence of mental health conditions, with rates of PTSD being particularly high compared to population norms (Cerna, 2019^[5]; Rayes, 2022^[9]). Without adequate psychosocial support, the traumatic and stressful experiences Ukrainian young people may have endured could have a lasting impact on their development (Irish National Teachers' Association, 2022^[10]).

Following the onset of the invasion, ensuring access to education for children and young people fleeing Ukraine was recognised as an “immediate priority” for European host countries (European Commission, 2022^[11]), and education systems have since implemented a variety of measures to integrate refugee learners into their school systems (European Education Area, 2022^[12]). Beyond access, the challenge for education systems and schools going forward is to facilitate the successful and meaningful inclusion of Ukrainian students (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). This requires action not only to enable them to continue their learning but also to effectively respond to and address their diverse social and emotional needs (European Commission, 2022^[4]). Social needs include the ability to communicate with others; to bond with peers, family members, members of their culture and communities; and to feel a sense of belonging. In addition, refugee students also need to develop a strong personal identity, which may require them to navigate between their home and host cultures. Addressing Ukrainian refugees' emotional needs involves establishing a sense of safety at school, as well as supporting them in coping with and processing loss, trauma, separation and grief (Cerna, 2019^[5]).

Schools can be a stabilising feature in the lives of refugee learners, a space where they can feel safe and protected, connect with their peers, and continue their education (Cerna, 2019^[5]; European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). Schools can also serve as a place for social and emotional learning (outlined in Box 1), which is essential for helping students process their emotions and navigate the challenges associated with adjusting to a new culture (McBrien, 2022^[13]), and as a site where additional psychosocial support services can be accessed (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). This brief sets out some key policy considerations for education systems in supporting the social and emotional well-being of Ukrainian refugee children and young people, before discussing some measures that have so far been implemented by host countries.

Box 1. Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is receiving increased attention across education systems as an important aspect of students' education. Social and emotional learning helps students develop the skills, attitudes and behaviours to process their emotions, understand their environment, work with others, and adapt to change in an increasingly uncertain world (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš and Drasgow, 2018^[14]; McBrien, 2022^[13]). With guidance and modelling from teachers and caregivers, and through creative expression activities and opportunities to interact with their peers, students can learn how to become aware of their thoughts and values and how these shape their actions and learn how to manage them in constructive ways. Social and emotional learning also teaches students how to consider and understand the feelings and behaviours of others, including those from diverse cultures, and helps them develop the social skills needed to work co-operatively with others and develop healthy relationships (McBrien, 2022^[13]).

Research has shown that SEL can facilitate academic learning, in the sense that it helps students feel capable and secure (Brackett et al., 2019^[15]), and can contribute to educational achievement, employment outcomes and overall life satisfaction (OECD, 2021^[16]; OECD, 2015^[17]). Social and emotional learning can help support refugee and immigrant students in processing and overcoming the emotions and challenges they may be experiencing as a result of stressful and traumatic events that may have occurred throughout their migration journey and following their arrival in their host country (James, Iyer and Webb, 2019^[18]; McBrien, 2022^[13]). It can also play a crucial role in giving them the skills to manage uncertainty and adjust to a new culture and environment (McBrien, 2022^[13]).

Source: (McBrien, 2022^[13]).

What are the impacts for education systems?

Refugees are not a homogeneous group, and the social and emotional needs of newly arrived students from Ukraine will be shaped by a variety of factors, such as their age, gender, family circumstances, and their pre- and post-migration experiences (Cerna, 2019^[5]; Smith Jervelund and Krasnik, 2022^[6]). It is therefore important that there are processes in place for assessing the specific social and emotional needs of these learners following their arrival, so that schools can determine the appropriate forms of support. Education systems can support schools in this respect by adopting policies (in the form of regulations or official recommendations) or by developing tools or guidance, as has been done in a number of countries regarding the assessment of refugee students' prior academic knowledge and language abilities (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). An initial evaluation of newly arrived students' competences and language skills is, for instance, a requirement in Austria, France, Greece, Iceland, Sweden and Spain. Introductory interviews with newly arrived students are required at the upper secondary level in Slovenia to assess language skills, and are recommended in Estonia as part of the guidance provided by the education authority on determining learning needs (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). It is important to note, however, that school leaders and teachers may not have had extensive training on mental health issues, and input from in-school counsellors or external psychosocial support teams may therefore be required to determine the social and emotional needs of Ukrainian learners.

Teachers, as the primary actors in shaping the classroom environment, play a pivotal role in facilitating the inclusion of Ukrainian refugee students and in promoting their social and emotional learning and well-being (Pastoor, 2019^[19]). To be able to do so, they must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and

competences through the provision of high-quality continuous professional learning. These include an understanding of, and sensitivity to, the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, an ability to differentiate instruction to accommodate different language abilities, and an awareness of the signs of trauma and stress so that they are able to direct students to the appropriate forms of additional support where necessary (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]; UNHCR, 2021^[20]). Teachers also need to be able to critically reflect on their own attitudes and biases, and the ability to address issues such as discrimination and promote respectful relationships among students in the classroom (McBrien, 2022^[13]). In addition, teachers require both the training and time to develop their own social and emotional skills and to reflect on how their thoughts, emotions and relationships may affect their teaching (European Commission, 2022^[4]; Green and García-Millán, 2021^[21]).

While OECD research generally reveals a need for greater teacher training in these areas (Brussino, 2021^[22]), examples of professional learning courses that seek to prepare teachers to support the well-being of refugee students can be found in several OECD education systems. For example, INSETT is a multi-module course implemented in Norway, Sweden and Finland as part of the European-funded RefugeesWellSchool project that seeks to strengthen teachers' competence and self-efficacy in promoting refugee and migrant students' mental health and psychosocial well-being and in encouraging positive relationships and a sense of school belonging (RefugeesWellSchool, 2022^[23]). The course runs over a period of 12 weeks and covers themes such as chronic stress and resilience, increasing a sense of safety, trauma, self-regulation and other coping techniques, and stimulating positive and supportive relationships (Pastoor, 2019^[19]). In the United Kingdom, the International Rescue Committee's Healing Classrooms programme offers a series of online training sessions or workshops that focus on how teachers can provide safe and supportive learning environments as well as providing practical advice and resources on topics such as trauma-informed pedagogy, social and emotional learning, and mindfulness (International Rescue Committee, 2022^[24]). In addition to training courses and workshops, examples of resources to guide and support teachers in facilitating students' social and emotional well-being can be found in various countries and at the international level. For example, the "Guidance Note on Psychosocial Support" published by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies provides teachers with practical tips and strategies on how to integrate psychosocial support into learning in crises contexts, supported by illustrative examples (McNatt et al., 2018^[25]).

Outside the classroom, non-formal learning – such as sports, cultural and other extracurricular activities – is key in supporting Ukrainian refugee students' well-being through providing opportunities for social interaction, cultural exchange and host country language acquisition (Cerna, 2019^[5]; European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). Sports have been recognised as having the potential to provide "a sense of purpose and direction for young people recovering from the traumas of the refugee experience or the impact of racism" and to promote positive relationships within communities (Cerna, 2019^[5]; Dykes and Oliff, 2007^[26]; McBrien, 2022^[13]). Creative expression programmes – which aim to develop social and emotional skills through art, music or drama – can also reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression among refugee learners and support their social and emotional learning (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019^[27]). A 12-week creative arts workshop programme offered to immigrant and refugee primary school students in Montreal, Canada, was, for example, associated with higher self-esteem and reduced mental health symptoms (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019^[27]). Similarly, a multi-week story-telling and drawing programme implemented in Belgium was found to improve classroom relationships and support significant symptom reduction in refugee and migrant children "elevated levels of post-traumatic distress" (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). Positive impacts have also been associated with Save the Children's Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART) social and emotional learning programme. HEART supports stress reduction, well-being, and learning through the use of expressive arts – such as drawing, music and drama – and group dialogue to help children and young people process and communicate their ideas, feelings and experiences in a supportive classroom environment (Kaimal, Hommel and Pisani, 2022^[28]). The programme has so far been implemented in

schools in over 30 countries, including Ukraine, and will be piloted in Poland in early 2023 to provide support to Ukrainian refugee children and young people.

Peer-to-peer mentoring or buddying programmes can also be effective in promoting refugee students' sense of belonging through social connection. For instance, a peer-to-peer mentoring initiative implemented in Germany that paired refugee students with students from a non-refugee background was found to promote the development of positive personal relationships, facilitate refugee students' adjustment to and integration in their new environment, improve refugee students' abilities to form new social connections and strengthen their self-confidence (Koehler, Palaiologou and Brussino, 2022^[29]; Sauerborn, 2017^[30]; Schulz, 2018^[31]).

As a result of the trauma or stress they may have experienced, some Ukrainian refugee children and young people are likely to require dedicated psychosocial support beyond that which can be provided in the classroom or through non-formal learning. Schools can serve as sites where learners can receive specialised services delivered by trained professionals (including psychologists, specialist teachers, school doctors, and speech therapists) (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]) – which can be particularly important in light of the fact that refugees may, for a number of reasons, be reluctant to or face barriers in accessing such services through the general health system (Siarova and van der Graaf, 2022^[32]; Sullivan and Simonson, 2016^[33]).

In-school counselling is provided in a number of OECD education systems to support learners' generally, and is in some instances specifically targeted to address the needs of refugee learners. In the Republic of Türkiye, for instance, school guidance and counselling services were made available in a number of public schools to help support Syrian refugee children who had experienced trauma as part of a joint European Union and Turkish Ministry of Education project to promote the integration of Syrian refugee students into the education system (Cerna, 2019^[5]; Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 2017^[34]). In Australia, the New South Wales Department of Education's Refugee Student Counselling Support Team offers psychological expertise and services to schools to support refugee students and their families. Services include advice and consultation, additional support for the general school counselling service, targeted counselling in more complex cases, professional learning, and assistance in connecting refugee students with other support mechanisms (NSW Department of Education, n.d.^[35]).

In addition to offering in-school services, schools can play an important role in facilitating access to support services for refugee students delivered by external providers through referral processes and established communication channels (Baak et al., 2019^[36]; Podar et al., 2022^[37]). In Sweden, for example, Early and Coordinated Interventions (*Tidiga Och Samordnade Insatser*) is a joint initiative of the National Board of Education and the National Board of Health that promotes and facilitates collaboration among schools, health care and social services in order to ensure children and young people receive the support they need. As part of this initiative, inter-professional teams made up of school staff and health care and social services professionals explore different ways of working together (Skolverket, 2022^[38]). The Swedish National Agency for Education has also developed guidance for school management teams and in-school health services regarding cooperation with external actors to meet students' needs (Skolverket, 2022^[39]).

What is the outlook for refugee students from Ukraine?

The majority of European host countries have put in place regulations or issued recommendations to guide schools in assessing newly arrived students' knowledge, language skills and learning needs, including learners from Ukraine (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). In addition, some education systems – albeit a smaller number – have developed top-level guidance to help schools identify students' social and emotional needs and determine the psychosocial support required, with a few focusing specifically on those of children and young people who have fled Ukraine (Ibid.). Guidance published by the Ministry of Education in Denmark, for instance, advises schools to take an holistic approach to

identifying the competencies and needs of newly arrived learners (and in the on-going follow-up of their development). It recommends an initial screening interview to find out about each student's background, previous life experiences, interests and expectations, in addition to their language competences and prior schooling (Undervisningsministeriet, n.d.^[40]). Similarly, in Estonia, the Department of Education and Youth has set out a list of topics for schools to address as part of their initial interviews with Ukrainian students and their family or guardians, which includes mental health and how the student is coping (Haridus-ja Noorteamet, 2022^[41]). In its guidance for the reception of students from Ukraine, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport of the autonomous community of Valencia in Spain refers schools to the official reception protocol for displaced and newly arrived students, which specifies that school leadership teams should conduct an interview with each student and their parent or guardian to obtain information about their personal situation, health and family, as well as their academic background (Generalitat Valenciana Conselleria d'Educació Cultura i Esport, 2022^[42]; Generalitat Valenciana Conselleria d'Educació Cultura i Esport, 2018^[43]).

Dedicated teacher training courses and programmes addressing the social and emotional needs of Ukrainian refugee learners can be found in several education systems (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). In Slovenia, the National Education Institute held a seminar for teachers on strategies to support and promote the inclusion of Ukrainian learners who may have experienced trauma, with interventions from experts in psycho-traumatology and other mental health professionals (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]). The National Education Institute has also made available packages of online teacher training videos, which all include a dedicated video on mental health and psychological well-being (Zavod Rs Za Šolstvo, 2022^[44]). In France, the General Directorate of School Education and the General Inspectorate of Education, Sport and Research have developed an online three-part training course to strengthen teachers' understanding of trauma and the way it can manifest in students and provide them with practical strategies for addressing students' emotional needs the diversity of needs of children arriving from Ukraine (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Justice, 2022^[45]). Save the Children is also providing training to teachers in host countries such as Lithuania, Poland and Romania to strengthen their abilities in responding to Ukrainian refugee learners' mental health needs, both in terms of strategies that can be implemented within the classroom and in recognising when learners require specialised support from a trained mental health professional and referring them to the appropriate service provider.

In addition to teacher training offerings, tools and resources have also been developed in several education systems to support teachers in addressing the social and emotional needs of students from Ukraine. In Ireland, for example, guidance developed by the National Educational Psychological Service and published by the Department of Education provides teachers in both primary and post-primary schools with a number of practical recommendations to promote the resilience and emotional well-being of Ukrainian refugee learners, which are grounded in a set of evidence-based principles for providing psychosocial support after disasters or other traumatic events (Department of Education, National Educational Psychological Service, 2022^[46]). Pedagogical strategies to support learners in processing feelings associated with the trauma they may have experienced are also a particular focus of a guidance note published by the Italian Ministry of Education on how schools and teachers can promote the inclusion of students from Ukraine (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022^[47]). In Slovakia, for example, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education have provided teachers with access to webinars and recommendations on the inclusion of children who have fled Ukraine, psychological materials prepared by the Council of Clinical Psychologists, and links to podcasts providing guidance on discussing the war with students (UNESCO, 2022^[48]).

Initiatives providing Ukrainian children and young people with opportunities for social interaction, cultural exchange and creative expression have also been implemented in some education systems. In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Education is providing support, including funding, to "adaptation groups", which seek to strengthen the psychological well-being of Ukrainian children and young people through creative activities, sports and other social activities and support their transition into school. While those working in

the groups are not required to have a pedagogical or psychological qualification, the Ministry recommends ensuring collaboration with a psychologist (iROZHLAS, 2022^[49]; Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2022^[50]). In Ireland, schools participating in the Creative Schools programme can apply to the Arts Council (the government agency responsible for developing arts and culture) for funding to engage translation and other services to facilitate the participation of Ukrainian and other migrant children in programme activities. The Arts Council is also offering professional development and supporting resources to its Creative Associates to work with schools to ensure the full inclusion of Ukrainian learners in the programme activities (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2022^[51]). Ukrainian refugee students in a number of host countries are also receiving psychosocial support through TeamUp, a programme that seeks to improve the psychosocial well-being of children and young people affected by conflict through structured movement-based activities (War Child Holland, 2022^[52]). The programme – which was jointly created by Save the Children Netherlands, the Dutch Committee for UNICEF and War Child Holland – is being implemented in schools and refugee shelters across Europe, with training being provided to local facilitators by War Child Holland and local partners (War Child Holland, 2022^[53]).

As the stressful and traumatic situations Ukrainian children and young people may have experienced could leave a lasting impact on their development, it is crucial that they have access to professional psychosocial services. In addition to the general counselling and psychological support that is required to be offered in schools in the majority of European host countries (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2022^[7]), some education systems have also implemented specific support services for students from Ukraine. In Slovakia, for instance, 62 expert intervention teams (comprising psychologists or special education professionals with experience in crisis intervention) have been established to provide psychosocial assistance to schools, with Ukrainian-speaking experts being available to assist each team. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport has also created a Ukrainian-language telephone helpline. Ukrainian-language school counselling/psychologist helplines have also been launched by the education ministries in both Estonia and Austria so that Ukrainian children and young people can receive psychological support in their mother tongue (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2022^[54]; UNESCO, 2022^[55]).

The Norwegian Refugee Council's Better Learning Programme, which is currently being rolled-out in countries hosting large numbers of Ukrainian students (such as Moldova and Poland), is an example of an initiative that seeks to support the social and emotional well-being of students affected by conflict through both classroom-based learning delivered by teachers and targeted sessions with trained counsellors. Initially developed in 2007 to improve learning conditions for children and adolescents exposed to war and conflict in Palestine, the programme has two components, BLP 1 and BLP 2 (Shah, 2017^[56]). Based on crisis psychology and traumatic stress research, BLP 1 is administered by teachers in the classroom and focuses on teaching students about the range of reactions and emotions they may encounter after experiencing crisis and strategies and tools to enhance their coping skills. Initial and follow-up training is provided to teachers as part of the programme, along with detailed guidance is provided to teachers on how to facilitate the sessions, depending on the particular context of their classroom. BLP 2 specifically supports learners who report nightmares and sleep disturbances linked to conflict-related trauma through a series of structured group and individual sessions run by trained counsellors. The psychosocial support offered in both components of the programme aims to establish a sense of stability and safety among students, to promote their feelings of self-efficacy and ability to self-regulate, and to build relationships and a sense of community. The programme also seeks to strengthen collaboration among teachers, counsellors, and parents in supporting students' well-being and building resilience in the school community (Ibid.).

What are the key considerations for policy makers?

- Addressing refugee learners' diverse needs and promoting their social and emotional learning and well-being requires a holistic approach encompassing pedagogical strategies and classroom interventions, non-formal learning opportunities and therapeutic support.
- As the needs of Ukrainian refugee learners will vary, it will be important for schools to undertake a careful initial assessment in order to determine the most appropriate forms of support. They can be guided in this through recommendations or tools developed and disseminated by education ministries.
- Given the pivotal role they play in promoting students' social and emotional learning and well-being, teachers will need to be supported and provided with opportunities for high-quality continuous professional learning. This is important to ensure they have the knowledge and competences to support Ukrainian refugee learners.
- Some Ukrainian refugee learners may have social and emotional needs that require support beyond that which can be provided in the classroom or through non-formal learning. While teachers are key actors in fostering the well-being of refugee learners, they are generally not mental health professionals. It will therefore be crucial to ensure that Ukrainian refugee children and young people have access to expert psychological support, whether through in-school counselling or by way of referral to services provided in the community.

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