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## 'They usually look happy.' approaches to the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Czech schools

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### ABSTRACT

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a high number of Ukrainian refugee children came to the Czech Republic, a country with little previous experience with refugee schooling. This study explored how Czech lower secondary schools in the 2022/2023 academic year managed to adapt to Ukrainian refugee students. We collected data from six schools that received high numbers of Ukrainian students; we interviewed principals, teachers, Ukrainian students, and their parents. The findings show that principals and teachers prioritised the psychological dimension of school adaptation in terms of the well-being of the Ukrainian students, and the sociocultural dimension in terms of building their social relationships with Czech peers and teachers. Academic adaptation took second place. This prioritisation contributed to creating a pleasant schooling experience for the Ukrainian students but also resulted in lower academic demands on them. This may negatively affect their future educational opportunities.

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## Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This led to the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, as more than seven million Ukrainians fled to other European countries. The Czech Republic received more than 400,000 refugees, making it the country hosting the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita (Operational Data Portal, *n.d.*). About one-third of the Ukrainian refugees fleeing to the Czech Republic were children (Operational Data Portal, *n.d.*). At the beginning of the 2022/2023 school year, Czech primary and lower secondary schools had enrolled 52,107 Ukrainian children, constituting 5% of the whole student population. Ukrainians became the most numerous ethnic minority in Czech schools (Ministry of Education 2022).

This was an unprecedented crisis for which Czech schools were completely unprepared. Their previous experience, not only with refugees but with foreigners in general, was minimal. Aware of this, we designed field research to investigate

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how Czech lower secondary schools managed the adaptation of Ukrainian students during the 2022/2023 academic year, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We believe that such research is necessary, as much of the research on refugee and migrant schooling has been conducted in countries with rich immigration traditions. The transferability of results to other countries, which have only recently experienced the immigration of different refugee groups, is limited (Brenner and Kia-Keating 2016).

We collected data from Czech schools that had received high numbers of Ukrainian students, aiming to understand how these schools approached the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. To our knowledge, this is the only Czech study based on in-depth data collection in schools during the refugee crisis. As such, it not only provides significant insights into host school systems and their coping mechanisms during the adaptation process but also offers knowledge about school adaptation in countries with less experience in receiving refugees.

Regarding conceptualisation, inspired by Berry's theory of acculturation (Berry 1997), we developed a framework for school adaptation conceptualised as a three-dimensional construct that included academic, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions. Academic adaptation is defined as the extent to which students successfully navigate the culture of learning, educational demands, local teaching methodologies, and classroom practices. This includes cultural beliefs and values about teaching and learning, as well as specific expectations regarding teacher and student roles in the host country (Cortazzi and Jin 1997; Yerken and Anh Nguyen Luu 2022; Zhou et al. 2008). It encompasses aspects such as student motivation, performance, and the management of expectations, in addition to meeting learning demands or dealing with learning pressure (Yu, Sahariar Rahman, and Li 2023). Psychological adaptation can be understood as a sense of personal and cultural identity, mental health, personal satisfaction in the new cultural context (Berry 1997), subjective well-being, self-esteem, life satisfaction, or happiness (Birman et al. 2014). Sociocultural adaptation is defined as the suite of skills needed to navigate everyday life in a new culture (Ward 2022), encompassing the ability to tackle daily challenges at home, work, and school (Berry 1997). This includes mastering practicalities in the new environment (instrumental), engaging with members of the host culture (interactional), and forming friendships and social networks with host nationals (relational) (Ward 2022). Researchers tend to use school achievement as the main indicator of refugees' school adjustments (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Solheim 2004), which can disregard the complex and interactionist nature of the adaptation process (Brizuela and García-Sellers 1999). We suggest that all three dimensions should be taken into consideration and understood as interdependent. Therefore, the research questions posed in this study were:

- (1) How do Czech school principals and teachers approach the academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugee students?
  - (a) in terms of school adaptation practices?
  - (b) in terms of educators' beliefs and conceptualisations?
- (2) How do Ukrainian students and their parents perceive the school's approach to academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation?

### *Adaptation practices in schools*

Schools play a significant role in helping children adapt to their resettlement country as they provide a context for acculturation through academic achievement, language acquisition, and cultural learning. This occurs via peer relations, extracurricular activities, and school norms around parental involvement (Pagel and Edele 2021; Trickett and Birman 2005).

Schools have developed specific practices to facilitate the adaptation of refugee students thereby creating what can be termed a 'refugee-competent school' setting (Borsch, Skovdal, and Jervelund 2021). Some practices target academic adaptation, such as language instruction and support for learning engagement, while others focus primarily on psychological and sociocultural adaptation, including appreciation of diversity and the creation of a welcoming and caring environment (Borsch, Skovdal, and Jervelund 2021; Kaukko, Wilkinson, and Kohli 2021; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Miller, Ziaian, and Esterman 2017; Prentice 2022; Sutton, Kearney, and Ashton 2021; Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Wilkinson and Kaukko 2019).

A lack of these practices is associated with negative outcomes in refugee students. Insufficient language teaching and linguistic support and a lack of adaptivity in adjusting curriculum and instruction are viewed as most harmful (Aydın and Kaya 2017; Berhanu 2006; Guo, Maitra, and Guo 2019; Kanu 2008; Vrdoljak et al. 2022). Some studies also report the inability of some schools to care for refugee students, support their sense of belonging and connection, and encourage acceptance of newcomers by the local students (Guo, Maitra, and Guo 2019; Vrdoljak et al. 2022).

Other studies have documented ambivalent effects of adaptation practices. Enrolling in intense language programmes can be perceived by refugees as a tool of exclusion and a barrier in access to education, limit access to the regular academic curriculum, cause labelling by peers and teachers, and reduce chances of reaching further educational levels (Bunar and Juvonen 2021; Emery, Spruyt, and Van Avermaet 2022; Nilsson and Bunar 2016). Furthermore, educators' caring practices can produce ambivalent outcomes – e.g., an inclusive approach and the avoidance of labelling could lead to difference blindness and a failure to perceive structural barriers (Brännström and Ottemo 2022; Cohen 2023). This stream of research is a reminder that the presence of certain adaptation practices cannot itself guarantee successful adaptation.

### *Educators' conceptualisations of refugees and adaptation*

Student performance is not only influenced by practices in schools, but also the beliefs, conceptualisations, and mindsets of educators. When teachers hold deficit models of students, characterised by low expectations and ascribing responsibility outside schools and teachers, it negatively impacts student achievement and well-being at school (Rainio and Hofmann 2021; Tan and Caleon 2022).

International research has confirmed that teachers often generalise about refugee students, perceiving them as not caring about education (Cohen 2023; Vrdoljak et al. 2022), blaming them for weak achievement, and having low expectations about their abilities (Berhanu 2006; Bunar and Juvonen 2021; Guo, Maitra, and Guo 2019; Lundberg 2020) rather than considering the oppressive contexts and structural constraints they face (Cohen 2023; Will, Becker, and Winkler 2022). However, a few studies have documented that refugee students can be perceived as having strengths and resources. In Turkish

schools, Serin and Bozdağ (2020) found both deficit conceptualisations and conceptualisations with no negative stereotypes about refugee students. In Sweden, Bunar and Juvonen (2021) found that teachers perceived refugees as students with challenges and needs but also resilience.

Although teachers' conceptualisations of refugee students appear important, few studies have directly related these conceptualisations to school adaptation practices. One exception is the research by Kanu (2008) who found that teachers' readiness to adapt their teaching to the needs of refugees was linked to teachers' beliefs about student capability, views about how students learn, and racial and cultural awareness. Teachers who believed in the high capability of students were more likely to adapt their curricula, instruction methods, assessment, and interaction patterns than those who did not.

We see this line of research as very promising, with the potential to clarify the ambivalent impacts of adaptation practices that we quoted above. We designed our study to investigate adaptation practices and educators' beliefs and concepts concerning adaptation and Ukrainian refugee students at the same time.

## Methods

### *Researchers' positionalities*

The authors of this study are researchers and pre-service teacher educators employed at one Czech university. Apart from one, the authors are of Czech or Slovak nationality. The sixth author, Oksana Stupak, is a Ukrainian academic who came to the Czech Republic as a refugee in spring 2022 with two school-aged children and found a new job at one of the Czech universities as a colleague of the other members of the team conducting this study.

Our interest in the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Czech schools stems from a belief in the importance of exploring the experiences of teachers, Ukrainian students, and parents to understand adaptation processes. The Ukrainian migration influx presented an unprecedented critical situation affecting Czech schools, coming shortly after they had managed another societal crisis that led to school closures and emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, we focused on conditions and factors that contributed to school effectiveness and resilience in crises, with an interest that is both academic and practical. We believe it is necessary to explore mechanisms for managing critical situations to build knowledge that can inform our teaching of future educators, helping them develop skills useful in challenging times.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned about the welfare of Ukrainian refugee students and the prospects for their recovery and integration into Czech society. This concern is shared by all of us, with Oksana Stupak being personally engaged in this matter as well. We believe this study can help Czech schools better prepare for receiving refugees and effectively supporting their adaptation.

Despite recognising the practical significance of this study and our engaged stance, we primarily positioned ourselves as interpreters and 'gatherers of interpretations' in relation to our participants, rather than as evaluators or advocates of certain positions (cf. Stake 1996). For further discussion on researchers' positionalities, see the section on trustworthiness and ethics (below).

## Context of the study and the participants

We collected data from six lower secondary schools in a large Czech city. We utilised administrative data to identify the eight schools in the city with the highest number of Ukrainian refugees enrolled in the 2022/23 academic year. Subsequently, we requested the school principals to permit research in their institutions. Six out of the eight schools agreed to participate, each hosting between 30 to 60 newly arrived Ukrainian refugee students. In each participating school, the study included principals, teachers, Ukrainian refugee students, and their parents. For participant details, see [Table 1](#).

## Data collection

In each of the six schools involved, we first interviewed the principal ( $n = 6$ ). The interviews took place in a school environment, and the average length of each interview was 68 minutes. We used a semi-structured questioning plan covering the following topics: recall of refugee students arriving at school, organisational matters related to it, leadership's work with teaching staff, understanding of good adaptation, received support, and perceived challenges.

With the assistance of the principals, we selected two teachers in each school who had a higher number of Ukrainian students in their classes and asked them to participate. All agreed, and we conducted individual interviews with them ( $n = 12$ ), always in a school setting. The interviews lasted 51 minutes on average. Our semi-structured questioning plan for the teachers covered topics such as: recall of refugee students coming to their classes, perceptions of Ukrainian students, understanding of good adaptation, instructional practices used for adaptation, received support, and perceived challenges.

Subsequently, the teachers invited Ukrainian students and their parents to participate; with their consent, the teachers provided us with their contacts. Two parents declined to participate in the research due to a lack of time. Therefore, we conducted 21 interviews with Ukrainian students and 19 with their parents. The interviews on average lasted 31 minutes with students and 37 minutes with parents. Although selecting participants who are willing to participate is legitimate within the case study design, thereby offering researchers an opportunity to learn (Stake 2006), we recognise this could lead to bias by predominantly including students who feel comfortable in their new school environment.

**Table 1.** Participants (All names are pseudonyms).

School	Principal	Teachers	Students	Parents
Red	Radana	Rita, Roman	Regina, Rima, Rostislav, Ruzhena	Ruslana (mother of Regina), Rada (mother of Rima), Renata (mother of Rostislav), Ruslan (father of Ruzhena)
Orange	Oliver	Olivie, Ornella	Olga, Oleg, Omelia, Oksana	Orina (mother of Olga), Olesya (mother of Oleg), Olena (mother of Oksana)
Yellow	Yanna	Yan, Yasmina	Yaroslav, Yulia, Yehor	Yuri (father of Yaroslav), Yuliana (mother of Yulia), Yustina (mother of Yehor)
Green	Gustav	Gina, Gita	Georgina, Gertruda, Gorpina	Gelena (mother of Georgina), Gafia (mother of Gertruda), Greta (mother of Gorpina)
Blue	Beata	Beatrice, Brigita	Bogdan, Bettina, Boris, Borislav	Bozhena (mother of Bogdan), Barbara (mother of Bettina), Bronislava (mother of Borislav)
Violet	Valentin	Viktorie, Viola	Vika, Vasilisa, Vita	Varvara (mother of Vika), Valentina (mother of Vasilisa), Vladislava (mother of Vita)

To mitigate potential biases, we asked teachers to also invite Ukrainian students and parents who might be struggling with their adaptation. The interviews were conducted in school or university settings, always with two members of the research team present as interviewers, one of whom was always Oksana Stupak. Fluent in Ukrainian and Russian, she provided interpretation when necessary.

We utilised a semi-structured interview format for students, covering the following topics: transition from Ukrainian to Czech schools, academic achievements, perceived support, language acquisition, peer relations, and educational aspirations. Similarly, the semi-structured interview format for parents addressed topics such as their children's transition from Ukrainian to Czech schools, the support their children received from the school, parent-child academic and social support, overall satisfaction with Czech schools, future plans, and educational aspirations.

In total, we had 58 interviews with a combined duration of 2,519 minutes. All data were gathered between October 2022 and February 2023.

### *Data analysis*

In alignment with the general principles of analysis in case study research design, as well as with more specific recommendations relevant to instrumental case studies (Stake 1996), we employed several analytical strategies. Firstly, the most basic analytical strategy involved looking for patterns and consistency in empirical data, while coding was utilised to identify these patterns. Coding, as understood across diverse qualitative data analysis literature, is defined as the process of 'reducing data into meaningful segments and assigning names to these segments' (Creswell 2007, 148). The next step involves combining codes into broader categories or themes. In multiple case studies, focusing on the relationship among categories across cases is crucial. Stake (1996) suggests that in instrumental case studies, researchers may prioritise identifying categorical correspondences over delving into case complexities, making 'categorical aggregation' a more apt analytical approach than 'direct interpretation'. Researchers aim to collect instances in data across cases to establish issue-relevant meanings, whereas direct interpretation might rely on a single instance from one case. Additionally, combining inductive and deductive analytical strategies is common in case study analysis. Patterns in data may be identified in relation to research questions, serving as a template for analysis, or emerge unexpectedly during the analysis process (Stake 1996).

Respecting these analytical principles, the researchers initially conducted open coding of interviews from the complete dataset for each participant type. Discussions about the meanings of the codes created led to the identification of mutual overlaps and the development of a shared coding tree of inductively generated codes, which was then applied to the data by all researchers. Subsequently, interview transcripts coded by individual researchers were merged into a single project using Atlas.ti version 7, facilitating the analysis of quotations that saturated the codes across cases. Researchers then shared analytical memos related to individual codes and synthesised them into three main categories – sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation – to structure the findings presentation. This approach allowed for the identification of patterned regularities in a more inductive manner (cf. Yin 2018), continuously refining the findings through

the conceptual framework (Creswell 2007). The theoretical framework thus served more as background ideas, shaping the inductively driven data collection and analysis.

### *Trustworthiness and ethics*

We strove to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings through several procedures. Firstly, routine and spontaneous discussions among research team members improved both the reliability of the coding process and the robustness of emerging data patterns and interpretations, which were scrutinised against alternative explanations. Secondly, employing analytical software (Atlas.ti) allowed for systematic, cross-case coding, ensuring the findings were well grounded in data through richly saturated codes. Thirdly, triangulating perspectives from diverse actors supported the trustworthiness of the findings (Flick 2018), by revealing both compliance and conflicts in actors' perceptions and experiences. Investigator triangulation (Stake 1996) further bolstered the trustworthiness of interpretations. Interviews with Ukrainian students and parents were always conducted by two researchers, one of whom also served as an interpreter fluent in Ukrainian and Russian, facilitating the discussion of meanings.

While these analytical procedures ensured adherence to some trustworthiness standards relevant to case studies (cf. Creswell 2007), compromises were made regarding others. Our findings offer limited insight into the complexities and specifics of individual cases, as we prioritised the instrumental logic of case studies over intrinsic approaches. Consequently, the findings provide only limited knowledge about differences between schools in aspects such as leadership strategies for adaptation processes, teacher professional development, and collaboration among teachers during the refugee influx, as well as the extent and quality of extracurricular activities for Ukrainian students. The analytical emphasis was placed on identifying shared patterns and strategies. Another limitation relates to the sample composition. Despite efforts to create a balanced sample by including students with varying levels of adaptation barriers, motivated Ukrainian students and parents slightly predominated.

This methodological concern ties into researchers' positionalities and ethical reflexivity. Although formal ethical obligations were met, this does not suffice for 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), where reflexivity in researcher-participant relationships are crucial. We acknowledged an asymmetry with participants of Ukrainian background, refugees with limited Czech language proficiency, being interviewed by middle-class Czech researchers. Thus, involving an academic with a Ukrainian refugee background, fluent in Ukrainian, Russian, and Czech, as both an interpreter and investigator, not only facilitated translation but also provided insights based on knowledge of the Ukrainian education system and cultural realities. Importantly, this researcher's shared refugee experience potentially made participants more comfortable sharing negative adaptation experiences.

From a procedural ethical standpoint, the Research Ethics Committees of Masaryk University approved this study. Research procedures adhered to the ethical principles of the 1963 Declaration of Helsinki and the APA's ethical standards. An informed consent form, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and strict confidentiality of information, was presented at data collection onset. Participants could withdraw at any time without reason.



## Findings

### *How do Czech principals and teachers understand school adaptation in terms of its academic, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions?*

In each school visited, the data gathering began with an interview with the principal, focusing on how they defined the adaptation of refugees within their school environment. Their responses were uniformly hesitant and lacked detail, revealing a superficial engagement with the concept of adaptation. It was evident that while all principals demonstrated a welcoming attitude towards Ukrainian refugees and expressed a desire to assist them, there appeared to be little in-depth consideration of what effective adaptation requires. Despite their good intentions, there was a notable absence of comprehensive planning or understanding of the specific actions needed to facilitate successful adaptation.

We don't define it. I don't think it's gonna come up in casual conversation whether they are adapted or not. (Principal, Orange school)

Most often, principals pointed to sociocultural aspect of adaptation, in the sense of building social relationships with their Czech peers and teachers. They also emphasised the Ukrainian students' psychological adaptation, namely their well-being.

I think we do everything we can to make sure that these kids are well received by the collective. So, to integrate them well means that they find friends not only in the Ukrainian community, but that they have friends among the Czech children. (Principal, Yellow school)

How is the adaptation going? Going well, that's what I think, like they usually look happy. (Principal, Violet school)

The academic dimension of adaptation, in terms of successfully participating in learning contexts, mastering curriculum, and performing learning tasks, was delineated as secondary to sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Learning disciplinary content was seen as potentially overwhelming, taking from students the time necessary for recovery and relaxation.

We did not push them to learn so much. It was all about them integrating into the classroom and getting to know the Czech language. (Principal, Orange school)

As evident is from the quotations above, the principals' opinions about adaptation were quite general, viewing it in a positive light. In contrast, teachers' views were more nuanced and focused about their day-to-day experience with Ukrainian students in their classes. The most prominent issue for teachers was communication. This involved both the ability of the Ukrainian students to understand and express themselves in Czech and their willingness to participate verbally during lessons and generally to talk with the teachers. Czech fluency was understood as a prerequisite for learning engagement.

I think Vira understands very well. She also writes well. She really wants to get good grades, she wants to get those As and she cares about those grades. And if she doesn't understand something, she'll come and ask. (Teacher Olivie, Orange school)

Ruzhena still doesn't understand Czech, even though she's been here as long as basically everyone else, so maybe there's no effort there either, or I don't know. It's hard to work with

her because she doesn't understand me, she usually makes a face like she's slowly going to start crying, like I'm making fun of her. It's hard with her. (Teacher Roman, Red school)

As is apparent from these quotes, teachers attributed the responsibility for developing language skills to students, positively evaluating those who made progress and negatively regarding those who did not. However, they acknowledged the limited support provided to students, attributing this to teachers' unpreparedness to instruct students with a different mother tongue. Czech schools lack specialists for teaching Czech as a second language, leading to Czech language and literature teachers being typically tasked with language education for Ukrainian refugees. This mismatch resulted in tension. Teachers viewed their situation as challenging, feeling inadequately trained and unsupported by leaders and administrators in their work with refugee students.

A Czech teacher is not a person who teaches Czech as a second language. We are absolutely not prepared for this, we have no training, we have not even experienced it in practice. (Teacher Ornella, Orange school)

In addition to communication and language skills, teachers identified another indicator of successful adaptation: the willingness of Ukrainian students to 'blend with the class'. This entailed participating in lessons without needing the curriculum, learning tasks, or instructional materials to be specifically tailored to them.

Yeah, adaptation. What it means to me is that the student somehow integrates into the team and is able to function in the class, to work in groups and alone, to participate in the lesson without the teacher preparing something specifically for them. That's my view of adaptation. (Teacher Yan, Yellow school)

Again, there was a perceived lack of capacity and capability to enable adaptivity by adjusting the curriculum and instructions for the refugee students. Both of the issues dominating teachers' thinking about adaptation revealed that the teachers wished that Ukrainian students would become like Czech students as soon as possible. Good adaptation meant being indistinguishable from Czech students.

### *How do principals and teachers conceptualise Ukrainian refugee students?*

The teachers and principals in our sample did not generalise about refugee students. They perceived them as a heterogeneous group.

Different children came here from Ukraine. Some of them came from good schools; they are independent, communicative, skilled, hardworking, and knowledgeable. But there are also kids who are neglected. (Teacher Beatrice, Blue school)

Judgements concerning students' abilities were diverse. Some students were found to be advanced, and others were seen as weak. It is worth noting that – lacking any other information about their aptitudes or previous achievements – teachers judged students according to their ability to master the current curriculum and learning tasks.

Maryna is absolutely the prototype of the genius child who is good at everything, she is especially good at math and science. ... Whatever you ask Maryna to do is done. (Teacher Ornella, Orange school)

The English level of these two girls is not the level of our eighth graders. They were, like, fourth grade when I came in. (Teacher Viola, Violet school)

Aside from the readiness to keep up with Czech students, teachers observed students' eagerness to learn and comply with the teacher's requirements. In the quotation of teacher Ornella above, we see a positive response to Marina's willingness to do 'whatever she is asked'. Failure to comply with a teacher's instructions was understood as a refusal to work.

Fedir was a bit more difficult, he didn't want to work. I used to let him use the translator on his mobile phone when we worked on word problems, but he took advantage of that by playing games all the time. So, I had to tell him, no, like, he can't do that. And he completely ignored it. I felt like his attitude towards school wasn't great. (Teacher Victorie, Violet school)

When talking about Ukrainian students who performed well, teachers referred to their talent, effort, and the good quality of their previous schooling. When talking about low-performing Ukrainian students, teachers saw their poor learning engagement and attributed it either to laziness and reluctance to work hard or to the traumatising situations the refugee students had experienced. Remarkably, no teachers considered their own instructional methods or the Czech schooling system as potential reasons for Ukrainian students not thriving. Even more remarkably, a lack of language proficiency – even when generally recognised as a barrier to learning – was sometimes mentioned as an excuse for not engaging in learning that was misused by Ukrainian students.

For example, what happened to me was that girls in the ninth grade pretended they didn't understand Czech. That's why I don't involve them too much, so they don't have to work. They took advantage of it and tried to hide behind the language barrier. (Teacher Yan, Yellow school)

Overall, our data indicated that, for principals and teachers, adaptation meant making the Ukrainian students as similar as possible to Czech students. The Ukrainian identity and background were neither disparaged nor appreciated. The knowledge and skills acquired by students in Ukrainian schools were only valued if they coincided with the requirements of the Czech curriculum. Teachers' attitudes towards students' participation in the Ukrainian online school were symptomatic – they saw it as a source of overload for students.

Some are lying on the bench and doing nothing. And then you find out that they have, like, a Ukrainian school online until 6 p.m. So, you take that they have to concentrate here in school, then concentrate on online teaching, and then again, the next day. (Teacher Viola, Violet school)

Ukrainian students were subjected to implicit normative comparisons to Czech students. Teachers did not take into account the potential benefits of studying in both Czech and Ukrainian schools. They also did not consider the diversified identity of Ukrainian students. In their view, to be well adapted meant to suppress Ukrainian identity – at least in school.

### *Educators' practices: easing learning tasks and lowering academic demands*

In previous sections, we showed that principals and teachers focused on the well-being of Ukrainian students and were careful not to make excessive academic demands of them. At the same time, they expected the Ukrainian students to become similar to Czech students who were subjected to rigorous academic standards. This clash resulted in an easement of learning tasks for Ukrainian students. They typically did not get assignments tailored specifically to their needs; instead, they were allowed to skip some exercises or do less of the work.

Researcher: You said that Maryna, she is a genius child and doesn't need any special care?

Teacher: No, no, no. Not at all. No. She's a hard worker.

Researcher: So, she does in the Czech language lessons all the same tasks as everyone else?

Teacher: Well, she can read, she can write, she can answer that, but for example, in terms of distinguishing word sorts, declinations, we didn't get to that at all. . . . I can't give her the same workbook, not at all.

(Teacher Ornella, Orange school)

This quotation reveals that even Ukrainian students perceived as bright and diligent were left out when teachers thought they could not handle the material they wanted to work on with Czech students. Remarkably, the teachers did not show any concern that Ukrainian students would be harmed if they did not learn some content. Rather, the teachers worried about grading the Ukrainian students, expressing a lot of dilemmas related to that.

I lack methodological support on the assessment of student learning, frankly. Yeah, that it could be given from the Ministry, that the students who are here for the first year should have mastered this, this, and this at the end of the school year, and I could already grade them according to whether they have mastered it. (Teacher Rita, Red school)

The teachers felt insecure about what grades to give Ukrainian students so as not to add to their stress. The grading dilemma typically resulted in them giving Ukrainian students better grades than their Czech classmates received for the same performance.

Of course, it is clear that we gave them a nice rating so as not to hurt them. (Teacher Gita, Green school)

Although the teachers did not worry that the Ukrainian students would learn less than their Czech peers, they did think intensely about the high school entrance exams, expressing doubts that Ukrainian students would be prepared to pass the exams at the end of the ninth grade. It was repeatedly claimed during the interviews that Ukrainian students could pass the entrance exams only if they prepared intensively outside school. This was noteworthy in combination with the lowering of academic demands.

I think that out of the four Ukrainian students in my class, two of them could manage the secondary school entrance exams with graduation. But they'll have to work hard, like, to do something for it. It's not gonna be enough for them to just do what they do here in school. (Teacher Viola, Violet school)

The result was a situation in which deliberately little pressure was placed on the Ukrainian students at school for reasons of well-being, but at the same time, it was accepted as likely or possible that they would fail in future schooling once the demands increased or their actual knowledge was assessed via standardised tests.

### ***How do Ukrainian students and parents perceive the emphasis on the sociocultural and psychological dimensions in the school's approach to adaptation?***

We demonstrated that Czech teachers accentuated the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of the school adaptation of Ukrainian students while framing academic adaptation as rather secondary. In line with this, Ukrainian parents and students portrayed Czech teachers as friendly, empathetic, and supportive. The parents appreciated the relaxed and comfortable atmosphere of Czech schools which they believed promoted more freedom for their children and a more humanistic approach than the Ukrainian school reality.

Our school in Ukraine is like a concentration camp. You come, sit at a desk, leave the classroom for five minutes during the break and that's it. And here in the school where he goes now, they have rest zones, they have longer breaks, they can even play. And there are such elementary things that when the children came, they liked that they could relax a little during the break. (Mother Bika, Blue school)

Interestingly, when asked about the academic aspects of school adaptation, informants somehow switched to the sociocultural and psychological dimensions, unintentionally mimicking the perspective of principals and teachers. Although primarily asked about the learning process and academic demands, students and parents tended to describe the positive approach of Czech teachers to students, the pleasant atmosphere, and their satisfaction – all aspects of sociocultural and psychological adaptation.

Researcher: Is there anything that would help you learn better, for example, some aids or even a teaching method?

Bogdan: So that we can all play together with the Czech children.

Researcher: What would help if it could be done?

Bogdan: If only we were better friends. (Student Bogdan, Blue school)

In this data excerpt, the student was asked about his need for academic support; however, he thematised his social need to play more with his Czech classmates. Similarly, Ukrainian parents often mentioned that their children would benefit from having more Czech friends, and more opportunities to establish friendships at extracurricular events, trips, clubs, etc. This discursive switch from academic to sociocultural adaptation might indicate that, although Ukrainian students and parents' sense of well-being in Czech schools was generally positive, the students' capacity for social belonging and inclusion in friendship structures of classroom collectives can be limited.

### *The need for Ukrainian students to have adaptation practices focused on language acquisition*

Czech teachers considered communication to be the most prominent adaptation issue; similarly, Ukrainian students and parents mentioned language as the most pressing barrier in the adaptation process. The ability to understand others and express oneself verbally are crucial prerequisites for psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation. Insufficient proficiency in the Czech language made it difficult for students to comprehend the teachers' explanations, especially in subjects involving lengthy talking and orienting in intricate texts. Ukrainian students often admitted that: 'Sometimes, I don't understand at all, I just listen' (Student Olga, Orange school). Moreover, they struggled to ask questions about topics they did not fully grasp or to seek clarification from the teacher as they did not understand how to do so.

The language barrier was noticeable not only in relation to academic adaptation but also in interactions with classmates. It appeared that Ukrainian students who struggled to speak Czech often had difficulties interacting with their Czech peers. Some Ukrainian students realised that to communicate with their Czech peers, they had to improve their proficiency in the Czech language. By doing so, they hoped to foster a mutual willingness among Czech students to engage with them.

To be honest, I initially felt uneasy around Czech people as they were new to me. I was hesitant to interact with them. However, I soon realised that making new acquaintances could lead to more friendships and support in the future. (Student Ruzhena, Red school)

This quotation illustrates that, although Czech schools received Ukrainian students warmly, there was an implicit expectation that they had to learn Czech to be able to engage both academically and socially. As we stated above, Czech language and literature teachers did not feel prepared to teach Czech as a second language and there was a lack of specialised teachers with this expertise in Czech schools. Because of the wave of refugees, the Ministry of Education allowed schools to hire Ukrainian teaching assistants. Most of the schools we researched in had taken advantage of this and the Ukrainian assistants started to play the role of cultural mediators helping overcome language barriers. During interviews, students talked about the great support of the assistants in the learning process in general (helping with translations, comprehending assignments, etc.).

Researcher: What difficulties do you face while learning?

Yulia: I struggle with language.

Researcher: Who helps you with that?

Yulia: Mrs. Yaryna, she is an assistant. She takes us out of some classes. At the same time, I can visit her and request help if I don't understand something. She is Ukrainian and has been living here for many years. (Student Yulia, Yellow school)

Similarly, Ukrainian parents placed great importance on the role of Ukrainian assistants in their children's education, including communication with the school and other forms of support.

Not surprisingly, when we asked the students and parents what other form of support they needed, they often mentioned that they would like to have a Ukrainian assistant available to them in class all the time. However, this was not always a reality. Moreover, the assistants were not certified for teaching the Czech language and the lack of their teaching competence necessarily influenced the effectiveness of the learning process.

The assistants are two Ukrainian girls who have a limited understanding of the Czech language. Rima says that sometimes she understands better than they do. They use a translator and tell her to write as she can. But Rima says: 'I won't write like that'. I tell her that she is right. Because once you write it down, you'll remember it. If you learn it right in the beginning, you'll do it right later. (Mother Rada, Red school)

Although this kind of complaint about schools was rather rare in the narratives of the Ukrainian parents and students, as they predominantly expressed gratitude and appreciated both teachers and assistants, it supports our finding related to personal deficits regarding language teaching of Ukrainian students in Czech schools. Although some Ukrainian parents invested in out-of-school language courses, not all of them had the means (or time) to pay for such extracurricular activities.

Insufficient language support was a major concern with the process of academic adaptation as expressed by Ukrainian students and their parents. Both schools and families faced critical structural deficits with negative implications for the adaptation process that could result in an achievement gap, significantly so for those students whose families were not able to provide additional support.

### *Lowering of academic demands as perceived by Ukrainian students and their parents*

As follows from previous sections, Czech teachers emphasised Ukrainian students' socio-cultural adaptation and their well-being and therefore reduced their academic demands. The Ukrainian students and parents we interviewed were aware of this.

Czech teachers strive to keep their students happy without overburdening them. (Student Yaroslav, Yellow school)

When comparing Czech and Ukrainian schools, both Ukrainian students and their parents described Czech schools as less demanding. Participants specifically mentioned there being less material to learn and fewer homework assignments. They also highlighted the practicality and usefulness of the curriculum in Czech schools, the engaging methods and instructional formats employed by Czech teachers to deliver the material (e.g., interactive methods, project-based teaching, frequent group work), as well as the appeal of extra-curricular activities (e.g., visits to a science centre, school trips).

The Czech school is a little easier in terms of learning. There is less content and it will be more useful in my life. It's more about the basics. In contrast, Ukrainian schools tend to emphasise learning a lot of unnecessary information that I have never found any use for. (...) Overall, I find the Czech programme and subjects more interesting and easier to learn. (Student Oksana, Orange school)

Some Ukrainian parents appreciated the reduced academic demands in Czech schools, perceiving this as providing freedom that allowed Ukrainian children to adapt more

effectively, attributing it to the absence of overload. However, some of the parents, especially those with higher academic aspirations, reflected on the potential unintended consequences of such a strategy and worried about the slower pace of their children's learning.

There is almost no homework at all. I can't get used to it. In my opinion, a child should study regularly. My child comes home from school and has nothing to do. I'm honestly freaking out. Basically, children rest more and socialise. (...) but still, I feel that they have lower expectations for our children compared to Czech children. (Mother Ruslana, Red school)

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The children were thrilled to receive their quarterly school reports. Where the subjects did not agree, it was crossed out, where they did, there was a nice mark. (Mother Orina, Orange school)

On the other hand, they might realise that the good grades did not necessarily accurately reflect what they had learned and may result from lower expectations of Ukrainian students.

They give Ukrainians better grades here. I think they'll give me normal grades now. The first six months they gave me better grades because I didn't understand, I didn't know the language. But now I think that there will be fair grades. (Student Yaroslav, Yellow school)

Earlier, we showed that some Czech teachers distinguished between Ukrainian students based on their performance and educational background. However, they did not adjust their teaching despite the noticeable differences in academic performance among Ukrainian students. The rare differentiation strategies of Czech teachers were concerned with assessment – Ukrainian students often received better grades than their Czech classmates for the same performance. These findings imply that, although the lowering of academic demands could be generally supportive in terms of sociocultural and psychological adaptation, it could also limit the academic progress of Ukrainian students. We discuss these implications in the final section.

## Discussion

In this study, we asked how Czech school principals and teachers approached the adaptation of Ukrainian refugee students and how Ukrainian students and their parents experienced it. We found principals and teachers accentuated the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of adaptation while the academic dimension was secondary. Our findings are in line with studies reporting similar prioritisation (Cohen 2023; Wilkinson and Kauko 2019) and differ from those documenting stress on academic achievements and workforce preparation (Baak et al. 2020; Lundberg 2020).



Above all, the Czech educators we interviewed valued student well-being and a sense of belonging to school and peers. They focused predominantly on creating a welcoming and caring environment. This has been recognised by many scholars as a positive practice in the service of refugee school adaptation (see e.g., Borsch, Skovdal, and Jervelund 2021; Kaukko, Wilkinson, and Kohli 2021; Prentice 2022; Sutton, Kearney, and Ashton 2021; Wilkinson and Kaukko 2019). The Ukrainian parents and students appreciated this approach and were grateful to the Czech principals and teachers for being friendly and supportive.

However, the literature also advocates for other adaptation practices, such as teaching language, supporting learning engagement, adjusting curriculum and instruction, and appreciating diversity (Aydın and Kaya 2017; Berhanu 2006; Borsch, Skovdal, and Jervelund 2021; Guo, Maitra, and Guo 2019; Kanu 2008; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Miller, Ziaian, and Esterman 2017; Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Vrdoljak et al. 2022; Wilkinson and Kaukko 2019). These practices were present only to a limited extent in the schools we observed.

In terms of language teaching and linguistic support, teachers reported struggling with this task and a lack of competencies for educating refugees. Barnes et al. (2021), Cooc and MyHyun Kim (2023), and Lavigne et al. (2022) saw a lack of teacher competencies as one of the main reasons that adaptation practices did not happen in ideal ways in schools. Our data are in line with this notion. In some of the observed schools, the linguistic gap was addressed by Ukrainian teaching assistants who were hired just to cope with the wave of Ukrainian immigration. In our data, it was evident that both Ukrainian students and parents appreciated the support of the Ukrainian assistants (cf. Vrdoljak et al. 2022); however, the assistants were not trained to teach Czech as a second language and thus could not fully support the students.

Regarding learning engagement, the teachers greatly appreciated when the Ukrainian students were engaged, but they had developed few tools to support them. Adaptivity in adjusting curriculum and instruction was similar. Czech teachers made little effort in this regard, a fact they attributed to the need to focus on the whole class and the lack of time in the lesson that they could devote specifically to refugees. This finding is probably due to the lack of teacher competencies for educating refugees (Cooc and MyHyun Kim 2023; Lavigne et al. 2022) and to inadequate support for schools at the school system level (Karkouti, DeVere Wolsey, and Toprak 2019; Özel and Erdur-Baker 2023; Vrdoljak et al. 2022). As we noted in the Introduction, before the recent refugee wave, Czech schools had very little experience with the inclusion of foreign students. Coping with the emergency more smoothly would have required more methodical support from the system level.

It would appear that an appreciation of diversity (Miller, Ziaian, and Esterman 2017; Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Wilkinson and Kaukko 2019) was present in the schools we observed, as the Ukrainian students felt welcomed, and the teachers expressed respect and empathy. However, the culture of learning was grounded in an expectation that the incoming students would fit into the class and not require special consideration. Previous researchers have noted the assimilative pressure put on minority students in schools rather than support of their bicultural orientation (Makarova and Birman 2016; Schachner et al. 2018; Trickett and Birman 2005). In our data, assimilation expectations were also manifested in teachers' not recognising the potential benefits of studying both in Czech

and Ukrainian schools, which could enable the development of students' Ukrainian identities. Studies have shown that assimilationist pressure into a host country's learning environment can lead to cultural identity conflicts (cf., Cortazzi and Jin 1997; Özdemir, Özdemir, and Kharel 2021), resulting in difficulty in being bicultural in school (Trickett and Birman 2005), although bicultural orientation has the potential to protect refugees from academic difficulties (Makarova and Birman 2015). In this light, the undervaluing of Ukrainian schooling and the request for students to focus solely on lessons in Czech schools can be interpreted as culturally insensitive and potentially harmful.

Ukrainian students and their parents agreed with educators that sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being were the most important aspects of adaptation and served as a gate to academic adaptation. Yet parents and students, more than teachers, pointed out the insufficient social interaction between Ukrainian students and their Czech classmates. Previous research has demonstrated that a lack of interactions with host society peers or even perceived discrimination negatively impacts sociocultural adaptation as well as academic achievement (McBrien 2005; Ward 2022); positive interactions with students in the classroom are beneficial for most youth of immigrant or refugee background (Schachner et al. 2018). The vague conceptualisation of adaptation by principals and teachers might indicate a lack of exact policy on how to successfully include refugee students in classroom collectives.

The primacy of the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of adaptation, together with the incapability of teachers to adapt curriculum and tailor the learning assignments, led to the easement of learning tasks and the lowering of academic demands put on refugees. Some parts of curriculum and schoolwork were skipped, which was legitimised as preventing refugee student overload. Although most Ukrainian students and parents appreciated the relaxed and non-pushy atmosphere of Czech schools, they also reflected on the negative consequences of such an approach (e.g., inadequate grades, potentially problematic transition to high school). The concerns about low academic pressure and liberal teaching styles can be understood as acculturation discrepancies resulting from entering more learner-centred education systems compared to the country of origin (see Makarova and Birman 2016; Yerken and Anh Nguyen Luu 2022).

Surprisingly the easement of learning tasks concerned all refugee students regardless of how advanced they – in the eyes of Czech teachers – were. While international research indicates that educators in host countries tend to generalise about refugee students and hold low expectations about their abilities and achievement (Berhanu 2006; Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Cohen 2023; Guo, Maitra, and Guo 2019; Lundberg 2020; Vrdoljak et al. 2022), the teachers in our sample perceived Ukrainian students as a heterogeneous group – variously advanced and talented. Our findings also attributed responsibility for student performance to the students themselves. Research on teacher professional thinking has highlighted the importance of teacher agency when thinking and talking about students (Rainio and Hofmann 2021). To be pedagogically productive, teachers have to feel responsible for student learning processes (Lefstein, Vedder-Weiss, and Segal 2020). Teachers in our sample were – in contrast to some findings in other countries (see e.g., Cohen 2023; Will, Becker, and Winkler 2022) – able to consider the contextual and structural constraints that made adaptation difficult for students, but they were not able to consider their role in the adaptation. Instead, they tended to overestimate the role of individual refugee student engagement and compliance with Czech schools. They

conceptualised successful students as those who worked hard and focused exclusively on Czech school, and unsuccessful students as those who did not.

Based on our data, the connection between practices and teacher conceptualisations in refugee education can be reconsidered. Kanu (2008) found that teachers who did not believe in the high capability of refugee students were unready to adapt their curricula, instruction methods, assessment, and interaction patterns to serve the educational needs of refugees. We found teachers believed in refugee students' capacity to learn but expected them to be responsible for their learning themselves. This conceptualisation is associated with a lack of practices targeted at supporting learning engagement and adjusting curriculum and instruction.

## Conclusion and future directions

In this study, we analysed data from Czech principals and teachers, as well as Ukrainian refugee students and their parents gathered at a very special historical moment when unprepared Czech schools accepted many Ukrainian refugees. Our study provides a first reflection on the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Czech schools. This reflection is important because Ukrainian refugees and their children continue to remain in the Czech Republic. At the beginning of 2024, there were 381,400 of them in the Czech Republic (Operational Data Portal, n.d.).

We found a strong preference for sociocultural and psychological adaptation over academic adaptation. While this might be useful in the short term upon students' arrival, it is not feasible as a long-term strategy as the systematic support of all adaptation dimensions needs to be intertwined and adjusted to the needs of refugee students. Therefore, it will be crucial to gain research evidence about the long-term thriving of Ukrainian students, with particular emphasis on their transition to high school and subsequent educational paths.

In schools engaged in our research, we found the authentic will of principals and teachers to help the incoming students. On the other hand, we observed a lack of teacher competencies for educating refugees and also insufficient support for teachers and schools at the school system level. A strong recommendation for national educational policy should be drawn from this. Although the experience with this refugee influx will enhance teacher competencies and self-efficacy for teaching foreign students (see Cooc and MyHyun Kim 2023), this would not be enough to build refugee-competent schools (Borsch, Skovdal, and Jervelund 2021). Therefore, systematic support for the professional development of in-service teachers is vital to prepare Czech schools for the future. Most importantly, teachers of Czech as a foreign language should be trained and placed in schools to help foreign students overcome their linguistic gap.

Also, this task falls to researchers, who must observe the development of Czech teachers' and schools' capacities over time and examine whether educational policies impact them positively and efficiently. Czech schools should not feel shy about how they navigated this unexpected situation, but there is still a long road ahead for them to transform into settings that help all children achieve their potential.

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