

The experience of war and the refugee crisis for Ukrainian children – implications for health care

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Abstract

Background: The war in Ukraine posed a major challenge to the Polish education system in terms of the need to provide assistance and admit Ukrainian pupils to schools. This required new organizational arrangements and additional educational and psychological-pedagogical support.

Objective: The main objectives of the study were to assess the level of preparedness and to describe the first experiences and needs of school psychologists and counselors in working with refugee children from Ukraine.

Methods: The study was conducted from May to October 2022. The study group consisted of school counselors and psychologists working in elementary schools (N=20). The research method was an in-depth interview.

Results: The study found that there were communication, didactic, social, educational, family and emotional difficulties when introducing children in refugee crisis into the Polish education

system. The challenge for schools was to create the right conditions for children to adjust to a new environment, including overcoming the language barrier. Respondents pointed to the need for support in recognizing children's worrisome symptoms and expanding their knowledge of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as educating the school community about cultural differences and incorporating methods to improve the integration of classroom teams with Ukrainian pupils.

Conclusion: The results of the study provide practical guidance on what actions should be taken to support the knowledge and skills of professionals working in schools.

Key words: post-traumatic stress disorder, healthcare professional – pediatric patient relationship, children with special needs

Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a mass migration of the country's

population to neighboring countries, with Poland becoming the main destination for civilians. This led to a humanitarian crisis in countries unprepared for such a large number of refugees. According to estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), during the first 3 months after the start of the war, approximately 3 million refugees arrived in Poland, of whom approximately 43% were children up to the age of 17 and 36% were children between the ages of 5 and 17 who were in preschool and primary or secondary school (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Operational data portal. Ukraine refugee situation. Continually updated. Available from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>).

One of the problems associated with the arrival of such a huge number of people in such a short period of time was the issue of educating Ukrainian children within the Polish school system. Language and cultural barriers, psychological trauma caused by the situation, together with symptoms of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became a challenge for professionals in both schools and healthcare facilities. A major problem was the instability of the situation in Ukraine and the declared willingness to return to homeland when the military situation improved. Only between May and June 2022, almost 8,000 children and their families returned to their country. Such situations contributed to the chaos in the Polish education system and undoubtedly had a negative impact on the children remaining in Poland, deepening their uncertainty about the future and disrupting their attempts to assimilate into the new environment. In parallel with the Polish education system, the Ukrainian authorities have also taken action by setting up a distance learning system based on the Ukrainian curriculum. According to data published in November 2023, there are 183,461 Ukrainian students in Polish schools who arrived in Poland after the start of the war and have refugee status. In addition, the Ministry of Education also recorded 103,073 pupils from Ukraine who had been living in Poland before the war started. In total, 286,534 children and young people studied in Polish

primary and secondary schools in the school year 2022/2023 (Kacprzak, 2023).

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, every person residing on the territory of Poland has the right to education (Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Journal of Laws of 1997, No. 78 item 483). The minister competent for education and upbringing coordinates and implements the education policy of the state and cooperates with voivodes and other bodies and units of the education system (Article 43 Coordination of the educational policy of the state. Education Law, Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59, as amended).

In the Polish education system, there is a distinction between compulsory schooling and compulsory education. The former applies to children from the age of 7 (or from the age of 6 at the request of parents) and lasts until the completion of the eighth grade of primary school. It may be completed outside school, within the framework of home education. Compulsory education involves continuing education until the age of 18 (Education Law, Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59, as amended).

The Polish school fulfils a number of important functions. It should be emphasized that in addition to imparting knowledge and skills, it shapes the educational environment and cares for pupils according to their needs and abilities. As an educational institution, it constitutes „the basic system of education, upbringing and care in a specific environment” (Woźniak, 1998). According to W. Okoń (2004), a school is an educational institution engaged in the education of children, adolescents and adults in accordance with adopted goals and tasks, and educational concepts and programmes. The quality and effectiveness of care activities determine the success of the education and upbringing process. This process will fail if the pupil's basic human needs are not met. The most sophisticated methods of teaching or educating will prove ineffective if the school does not ensure that the pupil feels safe, is rested, and has favorable conditions for working, studying or playing (Kapuścińska, 2021).

School counselors and psychologists, whom schools are obliged to employ, have an important

role to play. Their task is to respond adequately to pupils' problems, resolve conflicts within the school community and support the work of teachers. School counselors and psychologists are professionals with appropriate training and competences. Having the appropriate professional background is essential for the effective performance of these roles.

The primary task of the school counselor and psychologist is to provide assistance to pupils in difficult school and family situations, to ensure the proper development of children and adolescents by taking educational, care, preventive and remedial measures.

According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the principles of organizing and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1591, as amended), the need to provide a pupil with psychological and pedagogical assistance in a kindergarten and school arises, among other things, from crisis or traumatic situations; adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or to a change in the educational environment, including those related to previous education abroad. In the situation of the war conflict in Ukraine, children who arrived in Polish schools are undoubtedly in need of assistance in relation to crisis and traumatic experiences.

Teachers and professionals are often prepared to intervene in events such as the death of a loved one, or exposure to psychological and physical violence, including sexual violence. Trauma can also be triggered by many other events (Czarnocka, 2022). Often, therefore, there is a lack of specific knowledge or skills to respond to very rare situations, such as war trauma in particular, because this is a problem which Polish professionals employed in schools have not yet encountered on a daily basis.

The main objectives of this article are:

- To identify the extent to which school psychologists and counselors are prepared to work with children who have experienced the trauma of war.
- To describe the experiences and challenges of working with refugee children from Ukraine.

- To identify the support needs in recognizing the symptoms of trauma and working with refugee children from Ukraine.

Material and methods

The research method was an in-depth interview, and the tool was an interview script that structured the interview process and aimed to collect the same information from all respondents. The study was conducted between May and October 2022. The study group consisted of school counselors and psychologists working in primary schools. The size of the study group was 20. The survey used snowball sampling as a method of selecting respondents. The interviews were conducted by three researchers (authors of the article) with experience in qualitative research. The interview scenario consisted of three parts. In the first, we asked what was the source of satisfaction for school counselors and psychologists and what were the difficulties involved in this work. The second part referred to the respondents' observations of how Ukrainian children were functioning in school and the challenges of caring for these children. The third part focused on the participants' knowledge of PTSD.

The interviews were transcribed or recorded in detail and then a transcription was prepared. The interviews were anonymous and all respondents gave their consent to participate and to be recorded.

Results

The first experiences of school counselors and psychologists in relation to working with Ukrainian refugee children were various disturbing behaviors of the children observed by the respondents. Above all, the children were withdrawn. Respondents reported that children avoided eye contact, apologized for everything, and sometimes did not answer simple questions. It was also evident that the children were demotivated to learn and make contacts at school. The behaviors observed indicated that the children had lowered self-esteem and experienced a sense of otherness in the classroom with their Polish peers. There was also evidence of anxiety in the form of fear of being separated from a parent, hiding and isolating

from the class group. The children's caregivers also observed sleep problems and nightmares. During the interviews there were repeated reports of significant anxiety in children, who reacted violently to sudden situations, such as the sound of a falling object, and even ran away from school during evacuation drills.

The experience of war had a strong impact on Ukrainian children. The interviewed professionals noted that children returned to war-related topics during casual play, talking about escaping and alerts in Ukraine. Many of them were afraid to mention family, people who stayed in Ukraine or died during the hostilities. The children's memories varied depending on which part of Ukraine they came from and at what stage of the war they left their country. Some children managed to get to Poland when there was no military action in their area, others had unfortunately experienced bombing, fleeing to shelters or the death of people close to them. As a result, their subsequent behavior, which was often a reaction to difficult experiences, varied. Some children showed challenging behavior, such as breaking class or school rules. Older children manifested suicidal thoughts and engaged in self-harm. Interviews with school counselors and psychologists provided an insight into the difficulties encountered in introducing children in refugee crisis into the Polish education system. We classified these difficulties as communicative, didactic, social, educational, family and emotional.

Difficulties in working with refugee children from Ukraine

The main obstacle was the language barrier. The children did not speak Polish, so they did not understand what the teacher was saying to them in class. Some of the children did not know the Polish alphabet, as schools in Ukraine use the Cyrillic alphabet. The lack of translators in Polish schools often prevented communication between the teacher, counselor, psychologist and the child, as well as between classmates.

Communication problems translated directly into teaching difficulties. The children did not understand the content taught in Polish. The lack of textbooks in

Ukrainian and the lack of translators prevented them from fully participating in school activities. There was a problem with the inadequacy of requirements for Ukrainian students. Due to the lack of systemic solutions, students were taking the same credits and assessments as Polish students, even though they did not speak Polish. In this situation, many ambitious students received poor grades, which affected their mood and motivation to learn. Faced with the sudden situation in Ukraine, schools were unable to provide their pupils with certificates of their level of knowledge. Many children, who had left their country in a hurry, did not have any documents certifying the completion of a particular programme of study. Insufficient knowledge of the educational level of Ukrainian pupils meant that in Polish schools they were often qualified for less advanced classes. In older grades, pupils achieved good results only in science subjects, such as mathematics, where their lack of knowledge of the Polish language did not prevent them from participating in classes. In contrast, without the language or the alphabet, it was virtually impossible for them to participate actively in humanities classes in the same grade. In addition, not all Ukrainian children in Poland had regular access to the Internet from home so that they could complete missing information or translate their lesson notes. The situation was further complicated by curriculum differences in the education systems of the two countries.

Many Ukrainian students were overwhelmed by the amount of material they had to absorb. In addition to classes at the Polish school, they continued online classes at their Ukrainian school and attended extra Polish language classes, which meant that they came to class exhausted.

Another category of difficulties reported by school counselors and psychologists in the interviews were social difficulties. Ukrainian children were often unable to participate in all school activities because they had to look after younger siblings at home in the afternoons, while their mothers or guardians worked late into the evening. Their families often struggled financially. In response, schools launched special programs, such as subsidized school lunches.

The family problems experienced by Ukrainian children attending Polish schools mainly concerned separation from their loved ones. Children coming from families separated because of the war were often silent and withdrawn. Some of them were constantly surfing the Internet on their phones during lessons, looking for information about their relatives. Some children had to change their caregivers. It was not always their parents who were living with them in Poland. Some stayed in Ukraine and joined the army, others died. Contact between the school and the parents was often difficult because of the language barrier. This made it impossible for school counselors and psychologists to help the children or obtain information about the child's functioning at an earlier stage of development.

The children's emotional problems caused by the separation from their families were the result of them missing one of their parents and not knowing when they would be able to see their father, grandmother or grandfather who remained in Ukraine. These children were often sad, subdued and thoughtful during lessons. Some of them openly admitted that they wanted to see their mum or dad. Some spoke little about themselves and preferred not to develop deeper relationships for fear of being ridiculed. Some were ashamed of their situation. They did not want to talk about their experiences. Most of the older children wanted to return to their country, and regarded school in Poland as a period of waiting or time off from classes. Some of them even avoided attending school during their initial period in Poland. This made it difficult for them to integrate with their peers and engage in learning. Some marked their separateness by communicating online with their classmates who remained in Ukraine and did not want to interact with Polish students. These emotional problems experienced by Ukrainian children during the initial period of their education in Polish schools presented significant challenges for school counselors and psychologists, who had to distinguish between disorders resulting from the war trauma experienced, symptoms of computer or Internet addiction, and behavior related to a developmental crisis or pre-existing disorders.

Recognizing and identifying the underlying causes of the symptoms was all the more difficult because, as mentioned earlier, in the early stages of their stay in Poland it was virtually impossible to talk to the children or their caregivers without an interpreter.

Resources for working with refugee children from Ukraine

Interviews with school counselors and psychologists provided insight not only into the challenges faced by Ukrainian children in Polish schools, but also into the resources available to them. It was observed that younger children were more open, more willing to integrate into the group, trying out new vocabulary to communicate with their Polish peers. Many children sought contact, wanted to talk, learn the language and be part of the group. Working with such motivated children was quite easy. There was also a willingness to help on the part of older children from Ukraine who had already lived in Poland for some time. They were eager to introduce the newcomers to the school, explain the rules and tell them what was where. As time went on, the children who had graduated from a particular class started to feel like fully-fledged members of the school community the following year. Sometimes they even took on leadership roles within their peer group. A major asset for the Polish education system was the attitude of the counselors and psychologists working in schools. The interviews revealed their high motivation and readiness to work with Ukrainian children, their willingness to learn more about the difficulties experienced by these students, as well as about trauma and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Participants and interviewees talked about how much satisfaction they derived from their work, especially when they were able to help children, young people and their families and develop their professional competencies.

Needs of school counselors and psychologists in relation to working with refugee children from Ukraine

The survey identified a number of needs related to the functioning of the education system. The primary need reported by respondents was

access to interpreters in educational settings. As respondents stressed, language barriers can lead to social isolation. Any intervention by a school counselor or psychologist requires being able to communicate in a shared language. Respondents used a lot of support materials in their school work, but these were only available to students in Polish. At the time of the interviews, there was a lack of materials in Ukrainian and Russian in the schools. Due to the sudden onset of the war in Ukraine, schools did not receive recommendations for working with children, including curriculum recommendations. There was also a lack of systemic solutions such as preparatory classes, methodological tools for working with children in a war crisis situation and recommendations for working with children experiencing post-traumatic stress. School psychologists also lacked diagnostic tools in Ukrainian for assessing students' emotional and family situation. The need for cooperation with psychotherapists and child psychiatrists proficient in Ukrainian and Russian, to whom the child could be referred for further diagnosis and treatment, was also highlighted. At the time the interviews were conducted, access to specialists was severely limited.

The need for theoretical and practical knowledge about trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder was prevalent among respondents, while psychologists reported theoretical knowledge but lack of practical experience. There was a particular need for training on issues such as the concept of trauma, PTSD, its consequences, and the role of family and school in providing support, including the role of peers and peer groups. There was a strong demand for resources that would facilitate the acquisition of practical skills, such as training materials in the form of recordings of a sample first conversation with a child who has experienced a traumatic situation, a first meeting, response or intervention. Guidance was sought on how to approach such a meeting, how to talk to the child's parents, what to draw their attention to, how to deepen their knowledge of the situation and how to communicate with them about the child's worrying symptoms, and guide

them further in navigating potential biases about specialist consultation.

Another issue that was addressed was how school counselors and psychologists can empower teachers, including how they can work in groups, how to talk to children about their situation, especially when children start to describe their memories of the war during free play. The need to extend support to teachers who have become emotionally involved while working with children from Ukraine was also reported.

Counselors and psychologists working in schools also recognized the need to provide support to parents and caregivers of refugee children from Ukraine. The children are processing the situation they have found themselves in and are reliving various difficult experiences. There are moments when the parent does not know how to deal with the child's emotions and behavior. Therefore, they would greatly benefit from information, tips, and suggestions addressing issues such as what trauma is, what to look out for in a child's behavior, when and how to react, including where to get free help.

Discussion

Education is a fundamental right that is essential for restoring hope and dignity to children who have lost their homes. It is also an indispensable means of integration, enabling full participation in the host society, as well as in its political, economic, social and cultural life. The situation in Ukraine made it necessary to provide appropriate learning conditions for Ukrainian pupils as they were admitted to schools and institutions. Their inclusion required new organizational solutions. Additional care, pedagogical and psychological-educational measures had to be taken. School principals, teachers and professionals providing pedagogical-psychological support were confronted with a significant challenge.

In some schools, teachers lack the qualifications needed to teach groups containing pupils whose native language differs from that of the host country. Sometimes they also lack access to the specialized teaching resources needed to involve refugee children in school activities and to incorporate

the concept of diversity into the curriculum (Głabicka, 2014).

In 2010, a similar survey was conducted among teachers and school counselors on the situation of foreign children in Polish schools (before the war conflict in Ukraine). At that time, the findings indicated that one in four school counselors had never worked with foreign children before. The other survey showed less experience and orientation within the sample than the other groups (Czarnocka, Celuch, 2022).

The authors of the report „Inclusion processes for refugee children from Ukraine on the example of primary schools in Gorzów Wielkopolski” noted that „the school is also a place that provides education, but also offers psychological and pedagogical support in difficult moments” (Orłowska et al., 2022a). This perspective was very important to us when selecting the study group. Problems related to war experiences were also addressed by the authors of the study „The process of social integration of Ukrainian children in the Polish educational system”. They wrote that „the experience of war has left a very strong imprint on the psyche of children, often resulting in their withdrawal from peer activity and in socially unacceptable behavior. Reactions to severe stress are highly individual. Each child was a unique case and required individual support. Both younger and older pupils were observed initiating dangerous play, being violent towards other children and re-enacting difficult situations they had witnessed. The children’s psychological distress was evident in their withdrawal and avoidance of contact with teachers and other peers. Their memories were triggered by the material covered in lessons, conversations about the situation in Ukraine, or even specific symbols and sounds. Sometimes students avoided talking about their problems” (Jurek et al., 2022a).

The problem of pupils being overloaded, as highlighted by the respondents, is confirmed by the results of a study conducted in Ukraine among internally displaced persons residing in the Lviv region. The findings indicate that as many as 70% of children were studying remotely in the schools they

had attended before the war (Соціологічна група «РЕЙТИНГ», 2022).

In April and May 2022, a large survey of Ukrainian refugees was conducted with 773 respondents. As many as $\frac{3}{4}$ of the refugees surveyed were found to be traumatized, as measured by the RHS-15 scale. In addition, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents exhibited elevated levels of life stress. These data indicate that school staff should be well prepared to work with children who may have experienced trauma. At the same time, the majority of respondents felt that they lacked knowledge about issues related to trauma and PTSD. Respondents were also eager to learn skills that would allow them to build a relationship with those who have experienced trauma (Długosz et al., 2022a).

Orłowska et al. (2022b) described the difficulties faced by schools as a result of the arrival of refugee students. Their conclusions are similar to those of our study. The biggest challenge is the language barrier, as well as cultural differences and war trauma.

Between August and November 2022, a survey of 100 teachers and managers was conducted. Less than half (46%) of those surveyed had previous experience working with migrant children. The authors of this study described challenges associated with this kind of work, that overlap with our findings. These primarily include system and communication barriers, cultural differences, lack of previous experience of working with war-affected students, the need to adapt teaching materials, and peer integration issues (Jurek et al., 2022b). It is also important to consider the educational barriers faced by this group of students, as described in the work of Jurek et al., as most of them were also mentioned by the school counselors and psychologists we surveyed. These include language proficiency, difficulties in academic progress, curricular and cultural differences, different motivations, and war-related experiences (Długosz et al., 2022b). Baranowska also described barriers to integrating foreign students into the school environment and highlighted, among other things, the issues we outlined above. She wrote about communication difficulties resulting from poor language skills,

unfavorable social status, misunderstanding of tasks arising from the role of a student, and cultural differences (Baranowska, 2020). One gets the impression that the situation of Ukrainian students is well recognized and characteristic of the situation of those moving to a new environment.

Januszewska in 2017 described communication difficulties, isolation and lack of acceptance of children with whom it is hard to communicate and who look or behave differently due to cultural differences (Januszewska, 2017). Our study, however, goes a step further and provides insight into not only the experiences, but also the resources and needs of school psychologists and counselors in working with refugee children. Thus, the results of our study can contribute to the development of practical guidelines on what actions should be taken to improve the knowledge and skills of professionals who work in schools on a daily basis. This is all the more important given the long duration of the war in Ukraine and other migration crises observed in recent years, and the generally unstable geopolitical situation.

Conclusions

Information gathered from school counselors and psychologists in the first months of the war conflict in Ukraine indicated the need to adequately prepare teachers and other professionals, who, like everyone in the school environment, were confronted with a completely new reality. The integration

of students from Ukraine into the Polish school system is a challenging process that requires proper preparation.

One important aspect is systemic prevention – countering all forms of discrimination, breaking down stereotypes, responding to all forms of inappropriate behavior, including towards or by new students. It is therefore necessary to constantly monitor the educational situation in the school and in the classrooms, and to cooperate with parents.

The findings presented in the article also point to issues that need to be considered in the context of the doctor-patient relationship. The experience of war can influence a patient's behavior during a medical consultation. Just like the school counselors and psychologists interviewed, healthcare professionals may face a language barrier that can make communication difficult, even if the patients speak a little Polish. Similar vocabulary, as well as the stress caused by both the war and contact with a healthcare facility, present communication challenges. In addition, it may not be uncommon for a patient's family to experience numerous difficulties with regard to their functioning in Poland, which can make it harder to comply with medical advice. It is very important for the physician who comes in contact with a young refugee patient to recognize the family's situation and to not only provide treatment recommendations, but also to suggest the possibility of obtaining care in connection with the psycho-social situation of the child.

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