Studie Tematické

Interim Bridges to 'Them': The Challenges of Education and Living with Diversity Raised by the Ukrainian Crisis

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Abstract
This qualitative study explores the experience of living with diversity in three lower-grade public elementary school classes in the Czech Republic, focusing on the challenges brought to light by the arrival of immigrants from Ukraine in 2022. Conducted between September 2021 and March 2023, the research is based primarily on semi-structured interviews with educators, complemented by participant observation and document analysis. Drawing on insights from sociocultural anthropology, it examines *educators' understandings of boundaries*—particularly the categories of 'normal' and 'foreign', and the distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. Paradoxically, the integration successes observed in the cases studied appear to arise less from a systemic approach to diversity and more from the relative compatibility and adaptability of certain children and families with existing structures, as well as from the commitment and improvisational efforts of individual educators.

Keywords: challenges, culture, Czech Republic, diversity, foreigner, identity, inclusive education, normality, othering, Ukrainian crisis

Introduction

In the second half of 2021, we began examining the theory and practice of living with diversity in a Czech public elementary school. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shifted our focus to the arrival of Ukrainian refugee and displaced pupils. Centred on the perspectives of educators, and based primarily on qualitative interviews supported by insights from sociocultural anthropology, this study explores the concepts, categories, and sociocultural mechanisms related to living with diversity.

Gradually, the topic of educators' understandings of boundaries emerged—particularly the categories of 'normal' and 'foreign' and the distinctions between 'us' and 'them'—alongside a mismatch between educational objectives and actual practice. While the education system officially promoted pathways toward a democratic and inclusive society, several serious shortcomings became apparent. Notably, the successful integration of Ukrainian children we observed did not

result from the education system's capacity to accommodate diversity. Instead, it was largely the result of individual initiative, educator improvisation, and the adaptability of particular children and their families to majority norms. It is important to emphasise that the study does not aim to evaluate the success of Ukrainian children's integration. Rather, through the perspective of the educators, this article explores the construction, reinforcement, and potential transcendence of the boundary between 'us' and 'others'.

Literature Review

At the beginning of 2022, the Czech Republic had a population of 10.517 million. Since then, more than 390,000 refugees from Ukraine have been recorded, though not all have stayed permanently.[1] In September 2022, 39,478 Ukrainian pupils were enrolled in primary schools nationwide, and by September 2024, the numbers remained nearly unchanged.[2] The varying proportions of immigrants in different localities, influenced by factors such as personal connections and employment opportunities, indicate an uneven burden on individual schools.[3] It is important to note that, for various reasons, these figures may not fully reflect the current number of refugee or displaced Ukrainian children in the country.[4]

Recently, studies have been published on the inclusion of refugees, both in general[5] and specifically on the integration of Ukrainians into European societies.[6] More narrowly, research has examined their inclusion in European education systems.[7] Key themes identified in the listed resources

1 Cf. UNHCR, *Ukraine refugee situation* (Operational data portal, 2025), https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

2 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Mimořádné šetření k počtům ukrajinských uprchlíků v regionálním školství* (April 2023), https://www.msmt.cz/file/59799_1_1/; M. Spurný and P. Tabery, *Integrace ukrajinských uprchlíků: trh práce, bydlení, znalost češtiny a vzdělávání dětí. Hlas Ukrajinců* (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, 2025), https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/images/articles/files/5935/vyzkumnazpravahlasukrajincuvlna8vlna9.pdf

3 Cf. Konsorcium nevládních organizací pracujících s migranty v ČR. *Uprchlíci z Ukrajiny v datech a analýzách* (2025), https://migracnikonsorcium.cz/cs/data-statistiky-a-analyzy/uprchlici-z-ukrajiny-v-datech/#uprchlici-cr-pocty.

4 Cf. D. Prokop et al., *Hlas Ukrajinců: vzdělávání dětí. Výzkum mezi analýzách* (PAQ Research, 2023), https://www.paqresearch.cz/post/vzdelavani-ukrajinskych-deti-v-cesku.

5 Cf. N. Cooc and G. M. Kim, 'Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Adolescent Teaching Career Expectations,' *American Educational Research Journal* 60, no. 5 (2023): 882-915, https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312231184839; M. Gesthuizen, M. Savelkoul, and P. Scheepers, 'Patterns of exclusion of ethno-religious minorities: the ethno-religious hierarchy across European countries and social categories within these countries,' *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 82, (2021): 12–24, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.001; M. L. Seeberg, E. M. Goździak et. al., *Contested Childhood: Growing Up in Migrancy: Migration, Governance, Identities* (Springer International Publishing, 2016).

6 Cf. K. Andrejuk, 'Rapid Evolution of Refugee Policy in Poland: Russian Invasion of Ukraine as a Focusing Event,' *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* (2023): 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2023.2260337; O. Fedyuk, M. Kindler et al., *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union* (Springer International Publishing, 2016); M. Klimešová, J. Šatava, and M. Vondruška, *Situace uprchlíků z Ukrajiny* (MoLSA. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2022), https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/20142/1248138/Situace_uprchliku_MPSV_13072022.pdf/7f85ee74-a010-fc04-d696-364b1c4e3eab; Y. Leontiyeva, R. Mikešová and B. Tollarová, *Pražané s cizím pasem. Výsledky výzkumu cizinců a cizinek ze zemí mimo EU žijících v české metropoli* (Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 2018), https://doi.org/10.13060/m.2018.69; A. D. Moise, J. Dennison and H. Kriesi, 'European attitudes to refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine,' *West European Politics* 47, no. 2 (2023): 356-381, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2229688; L. Jirka, 'Growing-up young adults and their social agency in migration: how Ukrainian children initiate and mediate their own migration within the family unit,' *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 32, no. 2 (2024): 405-421, https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2024.2367902; L. Jirka and Y. Leontiyeva, 'Transnacionalismus, integrace a identifikace: Diskuse o proměnlivosti a dynamice sociálních procesů na příkladu studentské migrace z Ukrajiny,' *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 58, no. 1 (2022): 29-51, https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2022.009.

7 Cf. European Commission, *Supporting refugee learners from Ukraine in schools in Europe. European Education and Culture Executive Agency* (2022), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/066388; M. Herbst and M. Sitek, 'Education in exile: Ukrainian refugee students in the schooling system in Poland following the Russian–Ukrainian war,' *European Journal of Education* 58, (2023): 575–594. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12587; C. Koehler and C. J. Schneider, 'Young refugees in education: the particular challenges of school systems in Europe,' *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 28 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0129-3; D. Parmigiani et al., 'Educational strategies to support the inclusion of displaced pupils from Ukraine in Italian schools,' *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 4, (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100255.

include the uncertainty among the current wave of Ukrainian immigrants about their future plans, temporary stays, intentions to return to their country of origin, heightened vulnerability, family separation, difficulties integrating into an unfamiliar environment while on the move, language barriers, and potential emotional strain and post-war hardship.

In the Czech context, an overview study based on findings from the Czech School Inspectorate is available.[8] Additionally, research has explored parental experiences with education,[9] parental engagement in schooling,[10] specific aspects of refugee adaptation to primary schools,[11] and peer social networks and exclusion in Czech lower secondary schools.[12]

Further, various studies examine the inclusion and exclusion of children with special needs,[13] those from marginalised groups[14] or neighbourhoods,[15] children whose first tongue is a minority one,[16] and, notably, the notions of norm and normality within the Czech education system.[17]

Diversity[18] is widely acknowledged at both the national level—through the National Priorities of Oriented Research,[19] the Framework Education Programmes by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports,[20] and recent revisions of education programmes[21]—as well as within the

8 Cf. J. Novosák et al., *Interim Report on the Integration and Education of Ukrainian Children and Pupils* (Czech School Inspectorate, 2022), https://www.csicr.cz/CSICR/media/Prilohy/2022_p%c5%99%c3%adlohy/Dokumenty/Integration-and-Education-of-Ukrainian-Children-and-Pupils_EN-Summary.pdf.

9 Cf. D. Prokop et al., *Hlas Ukrajinců*.

10 Cf. N. Dombinskaya, 'Ukrainian Parents' Engagement with Czech Public Schools: Challenges and Roles for Parents,' *Studia paedagogica* 28, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.5817/SP2023-2-5.

11 Cf. P. Hladŏ et al., *Adaptace ukrajinských žáků na vzdělávání v českých základních školách* (Masaryk University, 2023), https://www.muni.cz/vyzkum/publikace/2270518.

12 Cf. T. Lintner et al., 'Revisiting Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks,' *Soc Psychol Educ* 28, no. 174 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10134-5; T. Lintner et al., 'Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks,' *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 409 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01880-y.

13 Cf. L. Hovorková, et al., 'Lived experiences with inclusive education from the perspective of a pupil with visual impairment and his mother—a case study,' *Frontiers in Education* 10, (2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1629428.

14 Cf. K. Hoření et al., *Analýza příčin vyššího podílu romských žáků vzdělávajících se dle RVP ZV UV ve třídách zřízených podle § 16 odst. 9, školského zákona a návrh souboru opatření pro oblast vzdělávání a další relevantní oblasti* (PAQ; STEM 2022).

15 Cf. R. Vorlíček and L. Kollerová, 'Non-Inclusive Teaching of Students with Special Educational Needs in a Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Neighbourhood,' *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (September, 2024):1-15, https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2024.2398635.

16 Cf. K. Hellerová et al., 'Legal recognition and legal awareness of children with a different mother language,' *Kontakt* 26, no. 4 (2024): 399-405, https://doi.org/10.32725/kont.2024.054.

17 Cf. R. Šíp et al., *Na cestě k inkluzivní škole: interakce a norma*, (Brno: Munipress 2022), https://munispace.muni.cz/library/catalog/book/2206.

18 Cf. C. Koppell et al., *Untapped Power: Leveraging Diversity and Inclusion for Conflict and Development* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2022); D. Maguire and Y. Keceli, 'The impact of formation and diversity on student team conflict,' *Active Learning in Higher Education* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/14697874221144998; N. Ratzmann, *Intercultural dialogue: a review of conceptual and empirical issues relating to social transformation* (UNESCO, 2019), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366825.locale=en; UNESCO, *Where do we stand on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education: Findings of the 7th Consultation on the implementation of the 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (2022), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381362.locale=en; L. Veer, and A. Dezentje, 'Human rights and cultural perspectives,' *UNESCO courier*, 4, (2018): 36-37, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366391.locale=en.

19 Government of the Czech Republic, *National priorities of oriented research, experimental development and innovations* (2012), https://vyzkum.gov.cz/FrontClanek.aspx?idsekce=782681.

20 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání* (2021), https://archiv-nuv.npi.cz/t/rvp-pro-zakladni-vzdelavani.html.

21 Cf. NPI, National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic, *Revize rámcových vzdělávacích programů* (2024), https://prohlednout.rvp.cz/.

broader European context.[22] It is evident that further progress is needed,[23] raising questions about whether the system and its practices are genuinely moving toward the ideals of a democratic civil society.[24]

Methodology

In this paper, we examine educators' perspectives on living with diversity. Our qualitative study, conducted between September 2021 and March 2023 at a Czech state elementary school in a city of 30,000 residents, focused on the first level of education (grades one to five, ages six to eleven). The core method of this research, carried out in the Czech language, was (1) semi-structured qualitative interviews with educators from the respective classes in a balanced 3:3:3 ratio (teacher, teaching assistant, aftercare teacher). This primary method was complemented by three additional approaches: (2) participant observation in three classes, with the researcher acting as a teaching assistant and/or aftercare teacher; (3) analysis of relevant documents; (4) shorter interviews and informal conversations conducted with various participants, including, among others, a school prevention specialist.

Pilot interview was conducted on May 8, 2022. The main interviews, held between December 20, 2022, and February 15, 2023, exclusively involved female educators, reflecting the typical gender distribution in Czech education.[25] [26]

Research notes and observations, recorded during interviews and in a research diary, captured interactions and self-reflections. To maintain an open approach to the topic, we adopted grounded theory[27] as the methodological foundation for data analysis. However, in this particular text, we apply it more flexibly—using it as a starting point while acknowledging its limitations, particularly its tendencies toward excessive positivism and reductionism. Consequently, in this paper, we do not attempt to construct an axial causal model.

The research, conducted from March 2022 to March 2023, included a pause during the summer holidays. The timeline below highlights key moments, particularly the waves of Ukrainian pupils' arrivals: (1) First wave (March 2022): Two Ukrainian pupils joined the first and second classes, while one entered the third class under observation. Before this increase, each class had 27–30 pupils. (2) Second wave (September 2022): Two additional Ukrainian pupils were placed in the

22 Cf. A. Duraiappah et al., *The International Science and Evidence-based Education Assessment: ISEE Assessment Working Group 2* (MGIEP, UNESCO, 2022), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380982.locale=en; EEA and Norway Grants, *EEA-NG Strategic Report: Czech Republic: 1st September 2021—31st August 2022* (2022), https://www.eeagrants.cz/cs/zakladni-informace/strategicke-zpravy/2022/strategicka-zprava-pro-rok-2022-4082; EU Agencies Network, *EUAN Charter on Diversity and Inclusion* (2023), https://agencies-network.europa.eu/working-eu-agencies/diversity-and-inclusion_en#diversity-charter; European Commission, *Diversity management in Central and Eastern Europe: Lesson learned and potential for growth* (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2017), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/20528; UNESCO, *5th global report on adult learning and education: citizenship education: empowering adults for change* (2022), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381666.locale=en.

23 Cf. Council of Europe, *ECRI Country monitoring in Czech Republic: ECRI Conclusions on The Implementation of The Recommendations in Respect of The Czech Rep. Subject to Interim Follow-Up* (ECRI, 2022), https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/czech-republic; K. Hoření et al., 1*Analýza příčin vyššího podílu romských žáků*; N. O. Kalu and M. Kurowski, 'Culturally Responsive Teaching for Learner Diversity in Czech Schools: A Literature Review,' *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 2, no. 6 (2021): 106-110, https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2021.2.6.202; M. Miskovic and S. Curics, 'Beyond Inclusion: Reconsidering Policies, Curriculum, and Pedagogy for Roma Students,' *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 18, no 2 (2016): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v18i2.1051 among others.

24 N. O. Kalu and M. Kurowski, *Culturally Responsive Teaching for Learner Diversity in Czech Schools*; R. Šíp et al., *Na cestě k inkluzivní škole*.

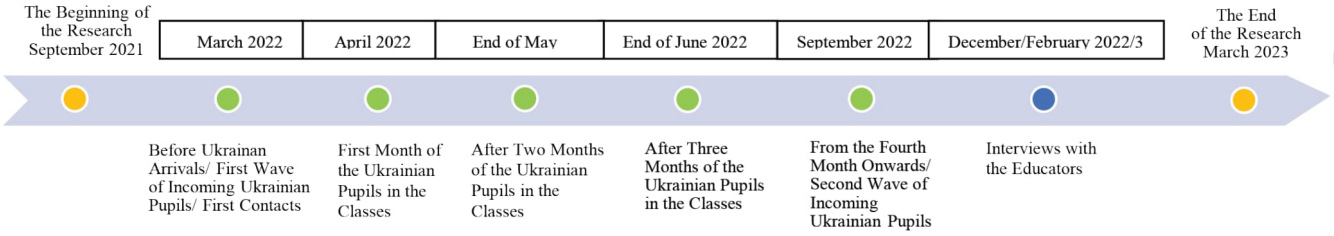
25 During the research period, the studied school's first level had sixteen female teachers and only one male teacher. Nationally, men accounted for just 5.9% of first-level teachers and 2.8% of all first-level educators.

26 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Mimořádné šetření k počtům ukrajinských uprchlíků v regionálním školství.*

27 Cf. K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: SAGE, 2014); J. M. Corbin and A. Strauss, 'Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria,' *Qualitative sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990): 3-21, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00988593

third class to ensure an even distribution. The surge in Ukrainian students across many Czech schools during this period resulted from a law mandating school attendance for child refugees who had been in the Czech Republic for over 90 days. Since most Ukrainian families had arrived in March and April 2022, children who had not previously attended classes were required to enroll in school after the summer holidays (July and August).

Figure: The Timeline of the Research



Ethical Concerns

The project adheres to the Code of Ethics of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology. A distinctive feature of this study is the dual role of Lucie Ludvíková as both a researcher and educator, enabling a natural and prolonged immersion in the classroom. However, this dual position also presents challenges in maintaining balance, underscoring the importance of the researcher's positionality and self-reflection. We prioritise empathy, minimise interference in personal matters, and uphold confidentiality. The presence of underage pupils further heightened the complexity of the study, requiring careful ethical considerations. The research design was presented to the school head, staff, and parents/legal guardians, all of whom provided consent. Children were informed about the study in a manner appropriate to their level of understanding. To ensure anonymity, all data were pseudonymised.

Interview Metadata Table 1: Educators on Diversity and Classroom Climate

	Class No. 1: 2nd Grade, Two pupils joined the class in March 2022		
Educator	Natálie; class teacher	Kateřina; teaching assistant	Leona; aftercare teacher
Length of Work Experience	16 years	1.5 years	30 years
First Language and Other Languages Spoken (A2-B1)	Czech English; German	Czech English; German	Czech German; Russian
Diversity Categories Noted in the Class Before Ukrainian Arrivals	Cognitive Abilities; Motivation; Language Skills (bilingualism)	Attention/Focus; Cognitive; Physical Abilities; Emotional Intelligence; Social Skills; Work Pace	Adaptability; Cognitive Abilities; Creativity; Neurodevelopmental Disorders; Social Skills; Physical Abilities
Diversity Categories Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	Language Skills, National Belonging	Motivation, Work Pace, (National) Mentality, Language Skills	No Major Change, Language Skills

Perceptions of the New Classmates	Varied Motivation/Cooperation; Varied Language Skills; Resistance Traits (certain level of arrogance)	Varied Motivation/Cooperation; Varied Language Skills	National Pride
Challenges Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation to Learn Languages; Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (fragmentation tendencies)	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation; Need for Empathy; Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (balance between diversity and equality)	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation; Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (fragmentation tendencies)
Areas for Improvement	Need for Earlier and More Intensive Inclusion and Communication Efforts—Including Czech Language Instruction	Insufficient Preparedness; Need for Earlier Teaching Assistants Involvement	Insufficient Preparedness; Need for Proactive rather than Reactive Response; Need for Earlier and More Intensive Inclusion and Communication Efforts
	Class No. 2: 3rd Grade, Two pupils joined the class in March 2022		
Educator Length of Work Experience First Language and Other Languages Spoken (A2-B1)	Věra, class teacher 18 years Czech English; German	Eliška, teaching assistant 2 years Czech English; Russian	Simona, aftercare teacher 32 years Czech Russian, German
Diversity Categories Noted in the Class Before Ukrainian Arrivals	Cognitive Abilities, Emotional Intelligence, Individual Development, Parental Cooperation, Social Skills, Work Pace	Creativity, Handicap/Dependency, Hidden and Obvious Peculiarities, Self-awareness	Creativity, Language Skills (speech impediments), Psychological Handicap
Diversity Categories Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	Language Skills, Motivation	Enrichment with a New Culture, Language Skills	No Major Change, Language Skills, Reflecting on Our Lives
Perceptions of the New Classmates	Varied Motivation/Cooperation, Confusion, Emotional Instability (Fear), National Pride, Resistance Traits (strong charisma, stubbornness)	Different Background, Emotional Instability (Fear, Spontaneity), Resistance Traits (strong charisma, superiority attitudes, stubbornness)	Confusion
Challenges Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation, Varied Willingness to Cooperate	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation; Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (fragmentation tendencies)	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation, Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (occasionally escalated situations)
Areas for Improvement	Insufficient Preparedness; Need for Earlier and More Intensive Inclusion and Communication Efforts; Need for Respect	Need for Earlier and More Intensive Inclusion and Communication Efforts-Including Czech Language Instruction	Insufficient Preparedness; Better Coordination Between Teaching Assistants and Teachers; Need for Earlier and Better Inclusion Efforts
	Class No. 3: 5th Grade, One pupil joined the class in March, two in September 2022		

Educator	Marie, class teacher	Zuzana, teaching assistant	Eva, aftercare teacher
Length of Work Experience	36 years, bilingual and of Ukrainian origin	3 years	38 years
First Language and Other Languages Spoken (A2-B1)	Ukrainian / Russian Czech C2	Czech English; German	Czech Russian
Diversity Categories Noted in the Class Before Ukrainian Arrivals	Attention/Focus; Cognitive Abilities; Creativity; Family Background; Psychological and Physical Characteristics	Cognitive Abilities; Different Background (newcomers, weak social/family background); Social Skills	Adaptability; Creativity; Dependency; Psychological/ Physical Handicap; Language/Communication Handicap (foreign language)
Diversity Categories Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	No Major Change; Language Skills	No Major Change; Language Skills; Foreign Culture	No Major Change; Language Skills
Perceptions of the New Classmates	Varied Motivation/Cooperation, Confusion, Fear of Unknown	Resistance Traits (stubbornness), Discipline	Emotional Instability (volatility), Resistance Traits (reluctance to contact others)
Challenges Associated with Ukrainian Arrivals	Language Barrier as Obstacle and Motivation; Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (class dynamics)	Need for Respect Toward a Different Culture; Addressing Sensitive Topics (esp., the war)	Language Barrier; Addressing Sensitive Topics (esp., the War); Need to Manage Classroom Cohesion (balance between diversity and equality); Reflecting on Our Lives
Areas for Improvement	Need for Earlier Inclusion Efforts; Establishing Cooperation Between School and Parents of Ukrainian Children	Insufficient Preparedness; Need for Earlier and More Intensive Inclusion and Communication Efforts-Including Czech Language Instruction; Establishing Cooperation Between Schools and Parents of Ukrainian Children	Establishing Cooperation Between Schools and (All) Parents; Need for Earlier and More Flexible Inclusion and Communication Efforts

Communication Barriers

Before the Ukrainian crisis, diversity was primarily perceived as individual cases of 'otherness' or deviations from what was considered 'normal'. Various factors were recognised, including cognitive, physical, psychological, and social abilities; language and communication skills; attitudes toward challenges; emotional responses; weak family backgrounds; and difficulties in collaborating with certain families. Multilingualism (often referred to as 'foreign-lingualism' [*cizojazyčnost*] to emphasise its deviation from the Czech-language norm) and foreign nationality (commonly equated with ethnicity in everyday practice) were seen as exceptional and had little impact on institutional functioning.

In 2022, some schools faced immense pressure to accommodate the large influx of Ukrainian pupils. However, the observed school had relatively low enrolment of newcomers. Despite this, all research participants agreed that the arrival of Ukrainian children significantly altered the situation, introducing new challenges for the institution, educators, classes, and individual pupils

while also disrupting daily routines. This shift brought certain aspects of diversity to the forefront, temporarily shifting attention away from other characteristics.[28]

During the initial encounters with the Ukrainian children, the mutual language barrier—their inability to speak Czech and the often mutual difficulty in communicating in other languages—became immediately apparent. Individuals, schools, nonprofit organisations, and the National Pedagogical Institute responded to this challenge in various ways.[29] Given the decentralised nature of the Czech education system, individual schools developed their own solutions.[30]

At the observed school, overcoming communication barriers was initially left to individual actors. 'If I could change a few things, I would start intensive language courses from day one and encourage more interaction between Czech and Ukrainian children. Some of the children were very withdrawn, and we didn't know how to naturally draw them into the group' (Eliška, teaching assistant, 19th January 2023). During this stage, educators and classmates made great efforts to establish contact, even if only through pictures and gestures. There was a clear sense of curiosity and fascination with the 'exoticism' of the newcomers. Unlike the Syrian refugee crisis (ongoing since 2011), which had little impact on the Czech Republic, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees evoked both a sense of exoticism and a strong feeling of cultural and historical closeness, leading to a considerable degree of empathy toward them.

The Czech education system has not yet systematically addressed the needs of children who can communicate satisfactorily in Czech but do not speak it as their first language. This issue can exacerbate the challenges faced by marginalised minorities, particularly some groups identified with the Roma ethnic minority. More broadly, it is likely to impact the academic success of children who, for various reasons, have grown up outside the Czech linguistic environment—once the initial wave of attention has subsided, this may also include Ukrainian children.

Addressing communication difficulties, as with most other specific needs, depends not only on the child but also on the cooperation and skills of individual educators and families. This, in turn, reinforces the reproduction of social inequalities.[31] The education system more readily recognises communication barriers among children officially classified as 'foreigners' or those with a professionally confirmed diagnosis. However, such barriers and special needs also affect children who do not carry a clear label of 'otherness' or 'disability'.

Although Czech and Ukrainian are linguistically close, they are not mutually intelligible. The same applies to Russian, which is also commonly spoken among Ukrainians. The need to communicate in an unfamiliar language, combined with shared experiences of migration and displacement, led the Ukrainian children we observed to form close alliances with one another.[32] The fact that these 'Ukrainian' groups did not become significantly isolated required educators' attention.

Educators' competence in handling linguistic diversity varied. While some were fluent only in Czech and lacked experience in multicultural or multilingual classrooms, Maria—a teacher of Ukrainian origin—was bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, and communicated in Czech with ease.[33] Our

28 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 1.*

29 Cf. META, *Inkluzivní škola* (2023), https://inkluzivniskola.cz/; NPI, National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic, *Portál podpory pedagogických pracovníků vzdělávajících děti/žáky cizince* (2023), https://cizinci.npi.cz/; NPI, National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic, *Ukrajina: rozcestník podpory* (2023), https://ukrajina.npi.cz/.

30 Cf. D. Greger and E. Walterová, 'In pursuit of educational change: Transformation of education in the Czech Republic,' *Orbis scholae* 1, no. 2 (2007): 20-21,41,42, https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2018.165; P. Hlaďo et al., *Adaptace ukrajinských žáků na vzdělávání v českých základních školách.*

31 Cf. D. Prokop, *Slepé skvrny: o chudobě, vzdělávání, populismu a dalších výzvách české společnosti* (Host: 2020): 67–83.

32 Cf. T. Lintner et al., *Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks.*

33 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 1.*

observations suggest that educators without broader experience in second-language communication tend to be less sensitive to language barriers.[34] Notably, none of the educators interviewed reported relying on their professional training to navigate this situation. 'I think we just weren't prepared enough. Personally, I learned a lot as I went along. More training and better information on how to work with children who have experienced trauma—or how to encourage them to engage without fear—would definitely help' (Kateřina, teaching assistant, 26th January 2023).

In May 2022—approximately two months after Ukrainian children joined the school—several Ukrainian-speaking teaching assistants[35] were introduced, and beginner Czech classes were established specifically for Ukrainian students. These lessons took place during regular school hours but separately from their peers. While this arrangement helped the children develop their Czech language skills, it also made it more difficult for them to fully integrate into their classes, as they spent less time with their classmates. Ukrainian-Czech-speaking assistants played a crucial role in bridging communication gaps, even during breaks.

National Belonging and Reification of Culture and Identity

With the arrival of Ukrainian children, the themes of national identity and pride became unavoidable. National belonging is deeply intertwined with the motives for migration, shaping expressions of solidarity while also surfacing in protests and resistance. Previously, the Czech social environment had approached national identity with distinct moderation. Public displays of national pride were typically confined to specific and strictly defined contexts—such as national holidays at public buildings or sporting events in stadiums. Beyond these settings, individuals displaying symbols like the national flag were often perceived as expressing radical views.

During our research, the contrast towards Ukrainian perceptions of what is considered 'normal' became evident. We observed children actively testing the boundaries of what was considered appropriate and acceptable. The current pupils, mostly Czech,[36] noticed that national pride is particularly important to their Ukrainian peers. This difference often sparked curiosity, which at times resulted in uncomfortable provocations. For Ukrainian children, national belonging became especially important, particularly in the context of being refugees or displaced abroad. It manifested on multiple levels—from the broader reality of war to smaller, everyday challenges—often overlapping in unexpected ways. For example, a boy hesitant to climb down from a gymnasium pole defiantly chants, 'To the glory of Ukraine!' From the Czech children's perspective, such behaviour felt unusual.

'Previously, we had experience with bilingual pupils from different parts of the world, but they were individuals—not groups of children from the same nationality' (Věra, teacher, 8th May 2022). The increased focus on nationality and the fact that the newcomers identified as Ukrainian led to widespread misunderstandings. The new pupils' expressions of confusion, fear, discomfort, and varying levels of willingness to cooperate quickly raised the question of whether these traits were inherent to 'Ukrainian culture'. Unfamiliar and difficult-to-interpret situations—such as a group of Ukrainian children singing their national anthem during a class break—seemed to reinforce the perception of mutual 'cultural' otherness.

34 Cf. J. A. Premier and J. Miller, 'Preparing pre-service teachers for multicultural classrooms,' *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 35, no. 2 (2010), https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n2.3.

35 Teaching assistants are not a standard feature in Czech classrooms; they are typically assigned through a complex process and only to children with officially confirmed special educational needs. While their formal role is to support the particular child during daily activities, in practice, their responsibilities often extend beyond this.

36 Unless otherwise specified, 'Czech' refers to attachment to the state; in everyday life, the term can denote both citizenship and ethnicity, and it is common to conceptualise one's own identity as an ethnically based 'either/or' binary opposition.

A notion of distinct, inherently unique, and unchanging 'islands' of culture tied to national or ethnic identity[37] was evident both in interviews and in practice. Within this framework, it would be difficult to question the misconception that Ukrainian identity was directly linked to a shared lifestyle or a specific set of character traits. Educators frequently referred to traits such as 'Ukrainian' discipline, pride, arrogance, stubbornness, and volatility[38]—often supporting their claims with specific anecdotes.

> 'Ukrainian children have a unique mix of pride and defiance. One pupil had a pronunciation issue, but when I corrected her, she looked at me and replied dryly, "But I understand, don't I? So what does it matter?" Then she went on to say it her own way' (Marie, teacher, 17th January 2023).
> 'One Ukrainian boy argued with me during math class that his way of counting was better. It wasn't about who was right—he just didn't want to be taught. In the end, he admitted he was wrong, but still added that his solution made more sense' (Eliška, teaching assistant, 19th January 2023).
> 'When they can't do something, they rarely admit it. One girlie had trouble with Czech inflection, but when I offered to help her, she shot back that it's not like that in her language and that only we Czechs make it so complicated. It's like the problem is more with the Czech language than with her' (Eva, aftercare teacher, 2nd February 2023).

However, Ukrainian children, like other children, are very different in terms of their temperament, interests, outlook on life, socio-economic background of their families, degree of willingness to cooperate, perception of the Czech Republic as a temporary refuge or a long-term place of residence, and so on. This is not to question certain shared symbols, norms and communication strategies among Ukrainian immigrants. Rather, to highlight that the impressions they convey also reflect a particular migrant experience, a limited ability to communicate in Czech, mutual misunderstandings. Many feel confused, traumatised, and dissatisfied with their current situation, which they did not choose and cannot change. It would be inaccurate to attribute everything solely to a shared 'culture' and link it directly to 'nationality'.
The effort to understand the complex notions of identity and culture, as well as the specific situation of the newcomers, was also highlighted in an interview with Marie, a previously mentioned teacher of Ukrainian origin who has long been established in the Czech Republic. On one hand, she speaks about the Ukrainian 'mentality', stating, 'I grew up in Ukraine, and I know the behaviour and mindset of this nation'. At the same time, she acknowledges the challenges of adaptation, adding, 'I see how these children struggle with adapting to Czech norms, but I also understand their pride in maintaining their identity. It's a delicate balance' (Marie, teacher, 17th January 2023).

The Norms

In its broadest sense, diversity should encompass the uniqueness of each child. However, the educational system typically acknowledges only certain student characteristics, primarily those directly tied to educational goals. To our knowledge, these categories vary across different segments and levels of the system. The categories reflected in (1) official documents such as the Framework Education Programmes[39] do not necessarily align with those found in (2) methodological templates or textbooks, nor with (3) the practical understanding of diversity in schools

37 Cf. T. H. Eriksen, 'From culture via multiculturalism to diversity,' *Culturologia: the journal of culture* 1, no. 1 (2012): 20-25.
38 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 1*.
39 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*.

and institutions, or (4) the perspectives of educators. Furthermore, individual teachers, teaching assistants, and aftercare providers do not always share the same views. This variation arises because the characteristics they observe in children are shaped by the specific focus of their pedagogical roles—whether fulfilling educational objectives, managing group dynamics, overseeing leisure activities, or other aspects of schooling.

The education system appears to favour a standardised notion of the 'normal, unproblematic pupil'. For students who deviate from this norm due to their needs, abilities, or characteristics, the primary approach is often to compensate for and minimise their 'deviation'.[40] Children typically fall outside the 'normal' category due to pronounced cognitive, psychological, physical, or communication limitations, problematic family backgrounds, significant distractibility, slow learning, or lack of independence.[41] At this point, it is important to address the issue of intersectionality.[42] For example, while Ukrainian refugee mothers with children received widespread solidarity from the Czech population, those identified as Roman-Ukrainian often faced longer wait times for assistance or were overlooked entirely.[43]

Educators we interviewed noted a permeability between disadvantages and advantages. Characteristics typically seen as strengths can sometimes be obstacles, while so-called weaknesses may, in certain contexts, serve as advantages. For example, Věra (teacher, 3rd January 2023) described how a Ukrainian pupil's reluctance to ask for help—typically seen as a barrier to learning—eventually led to the development of independent problem-solving skills. Eva (aftercare teacher, 2nd February 2023) noted that the language barrier, while problematic, sometimes functioned as a challenge that encouraged the use of extra-linguistic, non-verbal means of communication, at least temporarily enhancing cooperation among classmates.

However, their perspectives remain grounded in a normative integration model. This means they focus on fitting children into the existing institutional framework rather than advocating for a more inclusive system.[44] Given large class sizes, staffing shortages due to limited funding, and the lack of diversity training in Czech teacher education, redefining norms within state education remains a distant prospect. While inclusive education is officially promoted, in practice, the system often leans toward integrationist or assimilationist approaches.[45]

In the Czech context, current trends and methods in education are primarily driven by NGOs. While the topic is gaining traction in public discourse, educators face challenges in managing the overwhelming amount of information available. Accessing reliable, up-to-date knowledge is becoming increasingly difficult for some, which exacerbates existing disparities.

Some Czech authors conflate inclusion with integration.[46] Certain terms, such as 'intact children',[47] imply a dichotomy between 'normal' non-disabled children and 'non-normal' disabled ones under the guise of inclusion. It is important to note that these examples do not represent all actors in the decentralised system, where strategies among schools and educators vary. However,

40 Cf. R. Šíp et al., *Na cestě k inkluzivní škole: interakce a norma.*

41 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 1.*

42 Cf. M. Coote et al., 'Intersectionality in Education Research,' in *Encyclopedia of Social Justice in Education, Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomsbury: 2022).

43 Cf. L. Gulová, and R. Šíp, *Sociální pedagogika: časopis pro vědu a praxi: Inkluze jako výzva doby*, 7, no. 2 (2019): 10, https://soced.cz/cs/2019/11/socialni-pedagogika-2019-72/; J. Ort, J., R. Berkyová, and P. zewlakk Vrabec, 'Situace Romů v České republice v kontextu ruské invaze na Ukrajině, Fotografie Petra zewlakka Vrabce,' *Romano džaniben* 30, no. 2 (2023): 129–141, https://www.dzaniben.cz/files/e649e0919f41213fa71c6257364239eb.pdf.

44 Cf. R. Šíp et al., *Na cestě k inkluzivní škole: interakce a norma.*

45 Cf. K. Hoření et al., *Analýza příčin vyššího podílu romských žáků*; R. Šíp et al., *Na cestě k inkluzivní škole: interakce a norma.*

46 Cf. B. Lazarová et al., *Řízení inkluze ve škole* (Masaryk University, 2016): 13.

47 Cf. M. Tannenbergerová, *Průvodce školní inkluzí aneb Jak vypadá kvalitní základní škola současnosti?* (Wolters Kluwer: 2016).

instead of fostering a safe environment for the development of all individuals,[48] the Czech state education system tends to focus on 'fixing' children who are perceived as 'abnormal'.[49]
The arrival of Ukrainian children presents challenges that prompt institutions and educators to reconsider notions of 'norm' and 'normality'. This re-evaluation could benefit other children who have long struggled to participate in the Czech educational system, even before the Ukrainian crisis. However, our observations suggest that there is little questioning of the existing normative system. For instance, foreign-speaking Ukrainian children learning to read were provided with materials designed for dyslexics, to help them practice at a slower pace. This is not a critique of individual educators' dedication—nevertheless, the lack of established tools for addressing this situation appears symptomatic. Given educators' professional training, experience, and the absence of readily available resources for multilingual children, it was natural for them to resort to familiar analogies and sources: 'I found the worksheet on a popular platform, but later realised it wasn't culturally relevant and was hard for my students to understand' (school prevention specialist, 18th January 2023).

Interview Metadata Table 2: Educators on the Meaning of 'Foreigner'

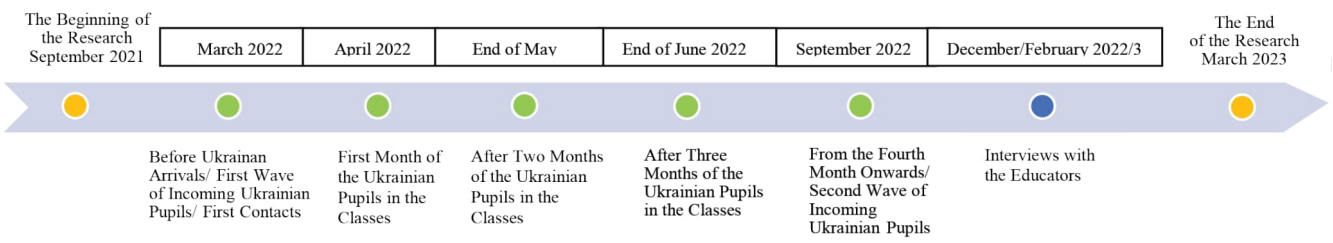
	Class No. 1: 2nd Grade, Two pupils joined the class in March 2022		
Educator	Natálie, class teacher	Kateřina, teaching assistant	Leona, aftercare teacher
How Has the Meaning of 'Foreigner' Shifted	'I used to think of the word "foreigner" almost as a label for someone from another world. But now I see that even people who come from other countries are just like us—they have the same dreams, fears and joys.'	'At the beginning I thought that a "stranger" was just someone who came here and then disappears again. But now that I work with children, I see that a stranger can be any of us when we find ourselves in a new situation. And the kids I work with are really great—they learn quickly and do everything they can to fit in.'	'When I started, "foreigner" meant someone else, someone different. But after all these years of working with children from different parts of the world, I've come to understand that it's all about where a child starts from. Every child, no matter where they are from, needs the same thing—to be understood and accepted.'
Expressions the Educator Uses about Ukrainian Pupils	New Classmates [*noví spolužáci*]	Newcomers form Ukraine [*nováčci z Ukrajiny*]	Ukrainians [*Ukrajinci*]
	Class No. 2: 3rd Grade, two pupils joined the class in March 2022		
Educator	Věra, class teacher	Eliška, teaching assistant	Simona, aftercare teacher

48 Cf. M. Kaleja, and E. Zezulková, *Školská inkluze versus exkluze: vybrané kontexty vzdělávání sociálně vyloučených dětí a žáků s potřebou podpůrných opatření* (University of Ostrava: 2016); V. Lechta et al., *Základy inkluzivní pedagogiky: dítě s postižením, narušením a ohrožením ve škole* (Portál: 2010); A. Petrová, E. Souralová, and E, Šmelová, *Společenské aspekty inkluze* (Palacký University Olomouc: 2017).

49 Cf. D. Denglerová and R. Šíp, 'Optimalizací inkluze k prohlubování nerovností ve vzdělávání,' *Pedagogika* 71, no. 1 (2021): 126-130, https://doi.org/10.14712/23362189.2020.1917; A. Hanáková et al., *Přístupnost v kontextu osob se zdravotním postižením* (Palacký University Olomouc, 2021); Z. Svoboda et al., *Koordinátor inkluze ve škole* (Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, 2020).

How Has the Meaning of 'Foreigner' Shifted	'I used to think of the word "foreigner" as something that divided people. I tended to see a foreigner as someone who don't quite belong here. But after years of working with children from different parts of the world, I realised that a foreigner is actually just someone we don't know yet. And that they have just as much right to be part of our community as anyone else.'	'I used to think "foreigner" meant someone who was simply from a different background. Now I see them more as someone with a different story, but with a lot of things in common. We feel that way in class now, too.'	'The word "foreigner" no longer has a negative connotation for me, as perhaps it once did. Now, in our school, it means opportunity—the opportunity to learn, to grow and to understand others better. To me, a foreigner is just someone who needs extra attention to become part of the team.'
Expressions the Educator Uses about Ukrainian Pupils	Ukrainians [*Ukrajinci*] + Individual Names and Surnames of Pupils	Refugees [*Uprchlíci*] + Individual Names of Pupils	Ukrainian Pupils [*Ukrajinští žáci*]
	Class No. 3: 5th Grade, one pupil joined the class in March, two in September 2022		
Educator	Marie, class teacher 36 years, bilingual and of Ukrainian origin	Zuzana, teaching assistant	Eva, aftercare teacher
How Has the Meaning of 'Foreigner' Shifted	'Before, "foreigner" meant someone who was completely different from me. When I came here in my twenties, I wanted to fit in as quickly as possible and become part of Czech society. Ukraine remained in my heart, but I felt more like a Czech. It was only when Ukrainian children started coming to our school that I realised how much I still shared with them. Often, we have much more in common than we would think at first glance.'	'At the beginning, the "foreigner" seemed like someone from somewhere else. The kids are amazing, smart and have a huge desire to learn. Plus, the ones who came from Ukraine showed incredible strength and courage.'	'Over the years, I have come to realise that "foreigner" is just a label that tells us nothing about who the person really is. Every child who comes to us has a story, and it's up to us to try to understand it, instead of labeling them right away. For me, "strangers" are more like "new friends" that we have the opportunity to get to know.'
Expressions the Educator Uses about Ukrainian Pupils	Our Ukrainians; My Children; My Countrymen; My Blood [*naši Ukrajinci; moje děti; domovští; moje krev*]	Individual Names of Pupils	Newcomers [*nováčci*]

The Timeline and Interview Metadata Table 3: Class Climate and Language Used about Ukrainian Pupils



The Timeline	March 2022	March 2022	April 2022	End of May 2022	End of June 2022	September 2022 Onwards
Phases	Before Ukrainian Arrivals	First Contacts; First Wave of Incoming Ukrainian Pupils	First Month of the Ukrainian Pupils in the Classes	After Two months of the Ukrainian Pupils in the Classes	After Three Months of the Ukrainian Pupils in the Classes	From the Fourth Month Onwards; Second Wave of Incoming Ukrainian Pupils
Class Climate	Exoticism, expectation, curiosity, compassion	Increased engagement, an atmosphere of acceptance, and at the same time an emphasis on the us-them boundary	Us-them boundaries, misunderstandings, and occasional escalated situations	Intensified us-them boundary, use of simplistic and derogatory labels, alongside a gradual shift to individual names	Relationships are redefined and language becomes more neutral; simplified terms persist but are less negative, **'Ukrainian' no longer typically signifies 'foreigner'**	Individualisation and a noticeable atmosphere of 'we share this class', the situation became easier for newcomers, though stances from previous phases remain present
Expressions the Children Use about Ukrainian Pupils	Refugees; Poor People without a Home; New Classmates [*uprchlíci; chudáci bez domova; noví spolužáci*]	Those from Elsewhere; Newcomers; Ukrainians [*ti odjinud; nováčci; Ukrajinci*]	Ukrainians; Refugees; Those Who Came from the War [*Ukrajinci; uprchlíci; ti z války*]	Refugees; Those with different humor [*uprchlíci; ti s jiným humorem*]; Ukrainians and pejorative terms for Ukrainians [*Ukrajouni; Ukáčka*]; shift toward using individual names	The New Ones; Refugees [*ti noví; uprchlíci*]; Ukrainians; Our Ukrainians [*naši Ukrajinci*] and pejorative terms for Ukrainians [*Ukáčka*]; individual names and surnames of pupils	Individual names and surnames of pupils; expressions from previous phases remain present

Discussion: Building Provisional Bridges

Approaches to diversity vary among individuals and institutions, influenced by differences in competencies, experiences, recognition of the topic's importance, and willingness to engage with it. Analysing the support educators receive from the education system reveals difficulties in managing the wide range of available tools and strategies. In response to the Ukrainian crisis, the National Pedagogical Institute and various NGOs have worked to equip schools with relevant resources.[50] However, like individuals, schools faced immense pressure, struggled with excessive workloads, and were often forced to improvise when addressing this complex—and for some,

50 Cf. META, *Inkluzivní škola*; NPI, National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic, *Portál podpory pedagogických pracovníků vzdělávajících děti/žáky cizince*; NPI, National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic, *Ukrajina: rozcestník podpory*.

entirely new—situation.

The recent revision of the Framework Education Programmes reflects an effort to update outdated concepts of pluralistic multiculturalism, which have historically framed groups as being 'characterised by a unified culture and a specific collective identity'.[51] While aiming to 'respect the particularities of different ethnic groups' and 'cultivate positive attitudes towards difference and cultural diversity',[52] past approaches have sometimes exaggerated or even created contrasts between groups. Many believe that the arrival of Ukrainian children has 'enriched diversity with a new culture' (Kateřina, teaching assistant, 10th January 2023). However, this notion of 'culture' often extends beyond norms, perspectives, and strategies, incorrectly encompassing aspects such as character and mentality.

The perception of cultures as distinct and separate entities can lead to assumptions of fundamental differences between 'us' and 'immigrants'. Misunderstandings arising from differing norms, values, and perspectives often serve as a significant source of tension. However, such difficulties also occur within established resident groups—not only between people of different national identities or between newcomers and locals.

This can be illustrated through various perspectives that emerged among the children at the observed school (and their families) as they experienced the initial stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022—even before the arrival of the first Ukrainian refugee and displaced pupils. The unexpected 'disruption of the usual order' was understood in diverse ways: (1) Some families viewed media reports as abstract and distant. (2) Others drew parallels with family memories, particularly from the Second World War, forming 'popular prognoses'. (3) Some engaged in conspiratorial or imaginative interpretations. (4) Several pupils were genuinely terrified by the blurred boundaries between their digital and physical worlds, where computer video games seemed to merge with reality. (5) Families with direct ties to Ukraine experienced the conflict firsthand, with parents getting involved and as first refugee relatives and friends were about to arrive in the Czech Republic. Thus, reaching a consensus on the unfolding events became challenging even within established communities. The school and individual teachers did not appear to address this multiperspectivity in any structured way.

Among the Ukrainian children integrated into the studied classes—one girl and four boys in March 2022, and two boys in September 2022—many aspects aligned closely with the norms of the Czech majority society. Factors such as their families' socio-economic backgrounds, cognitive and physical abilities, social skills, health, hobbies, and even physical appearance did not distinguish them from the majority. Also, the absence of direct war experience positioned these children closer to what might be considered the societal 'norm'.

Mutual misunderstandings often stemmed from narrow, one-sided perceptions of the situation rather than genuine 'international' differences. For example, some Czech families felt disappointed after organising humanitarian collections, expecting a more enthusiastic response from Ukrainian families. However, this expectation was based on a stereotypical view of refugees as inherently grateful and humble, overlooking their current hardships and sense of helplessness. Still, it is understandable that families who were forced to leave their homes may not feel comfortable in an unfamiliar place and situation they did not choose—nor in accepting worn-out clothes.

In interviews and classroom observations, varying levels of willingness to cooperate and learn

51 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*, 133; D. Moree et al., *Než začneme s multikulturní výchovou: od skupinových konceptů k osobnostnímu přístupu* (Člověk v tísni, 2008): 18.

52 Cf. MEYS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*.

Czech were frequently noted.

> 'We have kids who, even after six months in the Czech Republic, still refuse to speak Czech because they believe they'll go back home one day. We try to encourage them, but sometimes they just don't feel like it' (Eliška, teaching assistant, 19th January 2023).
> *'Sometimes I feel like some Ukrainian pupils keep to themselves and don't try to get involved. It might be shyness, but sometimes it also seems like a lack of interest in fitting in'* (Kateřina, teaching assistant, 26th January 2023).

These behaviours may be more closely linked to the uncertainty and distress of displacement than to intrinsic attitudes. Similarly, traits such as arrogance, stubbornness, or a perceived sense of superiority—often attributed to Ukrainian culture or 'national character'[53]—likely arise from the pressures of migration and the refugee experience.

The search for 'Czech-Ukrainian' differences often fixated on symbolically emphasised yet relatively superficial aspects of coexistence. One example was the attention given to Ukrainian pupils wearing embroidered national 'Vyshyvanka' shirts on the first day of school—celebrated as 'Knowledge Day' in Ukraine. In the context of displacement, national identity understandably becomes a central part of one's self-perception. However, despite differences in nationality and attire, the choice of clothing on the first day of school is often guided by a shared logic: marking an important occasion by wearing something beautiful.

Even well-intentioned assumptions of fundamental differences between Ukrainians and 'us' contribute to the processes of essentialisation,[54] marginalisation,[55] and othering.[56] When addressing diversity, it is crucial to recognise that it encompasses far more than just national or ethnic identity.[57] Furthermore, visible markers like embroidered shirts can sometimes obscure deeper cultural differences in norms, values, and underlying assumptions—factors that are far more significant in shaping shared coexistence. These aspects are more complex and important to understand, and they do not align with identity boundaries.[58]

The externally attributed 'stranger' category can be uncomfortable, and breaking out of it can be challenging—sometimes even impossible. Ukrainians in Czech society are frequently stereotyped as low-status, precarious workers.[59] Interactions during the Ukrainian crisis offer an opportunity to challenge and revise these perceptions. However, personal contact, such as sharing a school or class, does not automatically ensure positive relationships. Stereotypes and misunderstandings can persist, along with new challenges like balancing diversity, supporting those in need, and en-

53 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 1*.

54 Cf. H. Zilliacus, B. A. Paulsrud, and G. Holm, 'Essentializing vs. non-essentializing students' cultural identities: curricular discourses in Finland and Sweden,' *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 12, no. 2 (2017): 166-180, https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2017.1311335.

55 Cf. E. Abdelhadi, E., and J. O'Brien, 'Perceived Group Deprivation and Intergroup Solidarity: Muslims' Attitudes towards Other Minorities in the United States,' *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 604, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110604

56 Cf. W. Belabas, and B. George, 'Do inclusive city branding and political othering affect migrants' identification? Experimental evidence,' *Cities* 133, (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.104119; F. Dervin, *Interculturality in Fragments: A Reflexive Approach* (Springer, 2022): 97–108, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5383-5.

57 Cf. J. A. Christodoulou et al., 'Diversity and social justice in education,' in *Reimagining Education: The International Science and Evidence Based Assessment* (MGIEP, UNESCO, 2022): 256-327, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380985; S. Vertovec, 'Super-Diversity and Its Implications, in *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity* (Routledge, 2023): 18-42.

58 Cf. L. Abu-Er-Rub et al., *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies* (Routledge, 2019), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429430060; I. Klyukanov, *Principles of Intercultural Communication* (Rouletge, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429353475.

59 Cf. Y. Leontiyeva, 'Ukrainians in the Czech Republic: On the Pathway from Temporary Foreign Workers to One of the Largest Minority Groups,' in *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union* (Springer, Cham, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41776-9_8

suring equality. In our case, after an initial focus on supporting Ukrainian pupils, other children understandably began seeking attention as well.

Both interviews and observation reveal an ethos of openness, good intentions, and a commitment to personalised approaches, albeit with integration leaning towards assimilative undertones: 'When foreigners become similar, for example visually, in lifestyle, or hobbies, the boundaries of exoticism gradually disappear' (Marie, teacher, 17th January 2023). In the observed school environment, Ukrainian classmates who were initially perceived as 'foreigners' were reclassified into a new category—'closer than a foreigner'—within three to six months. During this period, the term 'Ukrainian' no longer typically signified 'foreigner'. This transition fostered a sense of mutual closeness, expressed as 'we are here together' (Zuzka, assistant, 10th January 2023). This motto was deliberately used at the school level in parallel with what happens in the individual classes.[60] The possibility of seeing the individual 'other' and what connects us to them opens up,[61] yet it is important to note that the actual foreigners in consideration were already extremely similar to 'ourselves' at the very beginning.

In the collectives, longer-term, yet somewhat fluid hierarchies, along with lingering antipathies and animosities, were observable. There were also discernible alliances of interest, some extending across international borders. While Ukrainian children shared certain experiences that bound them together, they did not confine themselves solely to their own national group. Instead, they explored themes that connected them with others. International contacts and friendships were slowly being formed, though, for the time being, they remained quite dynamic.

As more Ukrainian children arrived, they were perceived less as exotic. It became more apparent that particular Ukrainian children differed from one another. This shift increased the tendency to see them as individuals rather than representatives of a group. At the same time, the generalising category 'Ukrainian' was used more frequently, as it offered a convenient way to quickly label newcomers—albeit with a meaning shifted towards 'Our Ukrainians' [*naši Ukrajinci*], as noted above. Nonetheless, simplistic and derogatory labels [*Ukrajouni; Ukáčka*] were also present. In summary, both processes of othering and individual encounters could be observed, gradually altering the meaning of the term Ukrainian. The category itself did not vanish; rather, individual Ukrainians came to be seen as ordinary. We identify this shift—when Ukrainian no longer typically signified 'foreigner'—as a turning point in the dynamics of the class climate.

It appears that we should discuss the improvised integration of a (small) number of Ukrainian children who—thanks to their 'compatibility'—have fortunately adapted to the existing school system with minor difficulties, rather than that we could speak about systematic effective management of diversity.[62]

> 'The biggest problem was that, at the start, we weren't really prepared for what Ukrainian children needed. We should have focused more on supporting them individually and understanding their cultural background better. This made the first few months with us harder than they needed to be' (Věra, teacher, 9th February 2023).

The challenge of integrating Ukrainian children parallels that of other minorities in its haphazard

60 Refer to the *Interview Metadata Table 2; The Timeline and Interview Metadata Table 3.*

61 Cf. M. Buber, *I and Thou* (Howard Books, 2008): 35; F. Burda et al., *Člověk jako východisko dialogu kultur: Konceptuální předpoklady transkulturní komunikace* (Ústí nad Orlicí, Oftis, 2013).

62 Cf. P. Hlaďo et al., *Adaptace ukrajinských žáků na vzdělávání v českých základních školách.*

nature and the lack of broader structural changes in society. Concerning Roma people—a long-term marginalised minority in the Czech Republic[63]—the situation can still be summarised by an older statement: 'Individual schools and teachers are expected to perform "heroic acts", while the larger system remains unchanged'.[64] Systematic work with diversity and effective cooperation among all relevant institutions and actors remain major challenges for the future of Czech education:

> 'Looking back, we could have worked better with the parents of the Ukrainian children. We didn't involve them much in school life, and we probably sometimes overlooked how important it is for kids to feel supported not just at school, but at home too' (Marie, teacher, 17th January 2023).
>
> 'I'd definitely try to work more closely with teachers and parents. We needed to regularly talk about how the kids were doing, what they were learning, and what was bothering them' (Zuzana, teaching assistant, 15th February 2023).

The integration/inclusion of Ukrainian children are often shaped by factors such as the longing to return 'home', incomplete family structures, uncertain socio-economic conditions, and the need to cope with difficult life experiences. These circumstances frequently lead to a reluctance or inability on the part of families to support their children's education or to plan for the long term. Furthermore, the integration process is hindered by the uneven distribution of arrivals, insufficient resources and experience within the Czech education system, limited cooperation between individuals and institutions—including leisure-time pedagogy—and the complexity of prevailing attitudes toward immigrants.[65]

The journey toward diversity is undeniably complex, marked by uncertainty and the continuous effort required from all involved.[66] The de/construction of the boundary between 'us' and 'them' may not be the most immediate priority in times of crisis management, but it is essential for the long-term success of the integration and inclusion process.

Limitations

This text offers a partial contribution, outlining the internal dynamics observed within a specific institution through interactions with individuals and focused on perspectives of educators. Different studies may offer alternative perspectives on the issue.[67] Due to the limited scope of our article, we highlight the most pertinent observations, recognising that our analysis is not exhaustive. The institution under study did not experience a large influx of new pupils; however, the Ukrainian crisis presented significant challenges. While our study primarily focuses on edu-

63 Cf. K. Hoření, et al., *Analýza příčin vyššího podílu romských žáků*; V. Messing, 'Differentiation in the making: Consequences of school segregation of Roma in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia,' *European Education* 49, no. 1 (2017): 89–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2017.1280336; J. Obrovská et al., 'Predictors of educational aspirations of Roma mothers in Czech Republic, Greece, and Portugal,' *Social Psychology of Education* 26, (2023): 1063–1088, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09780-4.

64 M. Miskovic and S. Curics, *Beyond Inclusion*, 3.

65 Cf. N. Dombinskaya, *Ukrainian Parents' Engagement with Czech Public Schools*; P. Hlaďo, et al., *Adaptace ukrajinských žáků na vzdělávání v českých základních školách*; D. Parmigiani et al., *Educational strategies to support the inclusion of displaced pupils from Ukraine in Italian schools*; D. Prokop et al., *Hlas Ukrajinců*.

66 Cf. F. Burda, *Za hranice kultur: transkulturní perspektiva* (Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2016); J. Karlová, 'Naděje v našich krizích: jak neminout setkání s druhým,' *Studia Aloisiana* 15, no. 2 (2024): 43-53. https://www.tftu.sk/sites/default/files/sa2024-2.pdf; J. Karlová and P. Nalevanková, 'Blízcí neznámí: transkulturní analýza individuálního humanitárního darování,' *Caritas et Veritas* 13, no. 1 (2023): 81-97. https://doi.org/10.32725/cetv.2023.008.

67 Cf. T. Lintner et al., *Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks*; J. Novosák et al., *Interim Report on the Integration and Education of Ukrainian Children and Pupils*; D. Prokop et al., *Hlas Ukrajinců*.

cational environment of younger children, older age groups may present different dynamics and issues.[68]

Conclusions

This article has explored the complexities surrounding the integration of Ukrainian refugee children into the Czech educational system. Drawing primarily on qualitative interviews with educators, our analysis highlights the construction, reinforcement, and—at times—the transcendence of the boundary between 'us' and 'others'. Importantly, the aim was not to evaluate the success of integration, but to focus on the underlying concepts, categories, and sociocultural mechanisms that shape this process.

The concept of boundaries emerged as central, particularly in relation to several interconnected issues. One such boundary lies between notions of the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'—a dichotomy deeply embedded in a system that, while diverse in particular implementation, often expects children with special or different needs to conform to existing norms rather than adapting schools to accommodate all learners.[69]

Language barriers and national identity distinctions, which have been especially pronounced during the Ukrainian crisis, are also focal points. However, the common assumption that people sharing the same nationality also share a uniform culture oversimplifies the reality. In practice, internal diversity within groups has been underacknowledged, inadvertently amplifying perceived international differences that may be insignificant or irrelevant in everyday interactions.

Educators' approaches to diversity varied significantly, shaped by their individual competencies, experiences, and personal engagement with the topic. Despite a widespread ethos of goodwill, many found themselves operating within an unpredictable landscape marked by limited systemic support, resource constraints, and emotional strain—resulting in extensive improvisation. The integration successes observed in the cases studied cannot be attributed to a well-functioning educational system but rather to the relative compatibility of certain children and families with existing structures, along with the dedication of particular children, educators, and parents.

Although proximity and daily contact may facilitate familiarity, they do not guarantee empathy nor genuine inclusion. The emergence of categories such as 'closer than a foreigner' and 'our Ukrainian' demonstrates that shifts in perception are possible—but they tend to reflect how similar the newcomer appears to be, rather than deeper changes in how diversity is engaged with structurally.

The Ukrainian crisis has exposed assumptions previously taken for granted and could serve as a catalyst for rethinking education in context of diversity. While much has been said about how Ukrainian pupils have enriched Czech classrooms, the simplified discourse on 'culture' often extends into assumptions about national 'personality' or 'mentality'—enabling cultural essentialism to influence perception and practice. Misunderstandings and tension often stem not from genuine intercultural differences, but rather from narrow, one-dimensional interpretations of the other, with a focus on the most visible symbols and group characteristics. The point is that these mechanisms divert attention away from where the key issues of living in diversity lie.

This case shows that what we have observed is not a systematic, effective management of diversity, but rather the improvised integration of a relatively small number of children who, due to specific

68 Cf. T. Lintner et al., *Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks*.

69 Cf. J. White, *Pitfalls and bias: Entry testing and the overrepresentation of Romani children in special education* (Roma Education Fund, 2012), https://roma.education/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/pitfalls-and-bias-screen_singlepages.pdf.

circumstances, were able to adapt with limited friction. The Ukrainian crisis could prompt a review of education system with a focus on diversity, potentially bringing us closer to an inclusive civil society. What lies ahead is not simply a 'challenge', but a transformative task: developing coherent, collaborative, and sustainable approaches to diversity across institutions. This includes better support for educators, meaningful involvement of families, and recognition of pupils' individual backgrounds and experiences.

With gratitude to those who continue to build everyday bridges across the boundaries of apparent or real 'otherness', we underline the need to critically reflect on—and improve—the structures that shape how we live, learn, and grow together.

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