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SCHOOLING OF UKRAINIAN PUPILS IN VIENNA IN CONDITIONS OF FORCED MIGRATION

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The article deals with the problem of the integration of Ukrainian pupils into the Austrian school system in the context of forced migration. The aim of the paper is to establish the relationship between the traumatic experience of war, displacement and the quality of learning in new conditions, as well as delineate the factors that influence the reduction of stress in the classroom and, as a result, improve learning and integration in a new community. The vast majority of children was accepted by Vienna where there were taken various measures to ensure that Ukrainian children could be integrated into the learning process in the Austrian school system. There are a lot of different factors that play an important role in the process of this integration. In order to determine these factors, interviews were conducted with mothers and data were collected, analyzed and conclusions were drawn. It has been found that there were different stories of the integration into a new community even within one family. It depended on the atmosphere in the classroom, a variety of materials and forms of work, empathy of the teacher and classmates, acceptance of the school as the safe place etc.

Key words: Ukrainian pupils, integration, Austrian school system, forced migration, traumatic experience, interview, school as the safe place.

У статті розглядається проблема інтеграції українських школярів в австрійську систему шкільної освіти в контексті вимушеної міграції. Метою статті є встановлення зв'язків між травматичним досвідом війни та втечі з дому та якістю навчання в нових умовах, а також описати фактори, які впливають на зменшення стресу в класі і, як наслідок, покращують навчання та адаптацію до нових умов. Переважна більшість дітей була прийнята Віднем, де було вжито різноманітні заходи для інтегрування українських дітей в навчальний процес школах Відня. Існує багато різних факторів, які відіграють важливу роль у процесі інтеграції. Для того, щоб встановити ці фактори, було проведено інтерв'ю з матусями школярів, у результаті чого



дані було зібрано, проаналізовано та зроблено висновки. Було виявлено, що навіть в межах однієї сім'ї інтеграція в нову громаду відбувалася по-різному. Це залежало від атмосфери в класі, різноманітності матеріалів та форм роботи, емпатії вчителя та однокласників, сприйняття школи як безпечного місця та інше.

Ключові слова: українські школярі, інтеграція, австрійська система шкільної освіти, вимушена міграція, травматичний досвід, інтерв'ю, школа як безпечне місце.

Introduction. The paper focuses on the integration of Ukrainian pupils into the Austrian school system in the context of forced migration, specifically examining the emotional and psychological aspects as well as the supporting factors that influence the process of adaptation to new conditions. The aim of the paper is to establish the relationship between the traumatic experiences of war, displacement and the quality of learning in new conditions, as well as delineate the factors that influence the alleviation of stress in the classroom and consequently enhance learning and integration within a new community.

The topic of this research is familiar to the author of this article due to personal experiences. In March 2022, many mothers with their children relocated to Austria where the children were enrolled in Austrian schools. According to the recent data from the Austrian Presse Agency, approximately 13,000 Ukrainian pupils have attended Austrian schools since the start of the war in Ukraine (Austria Presse Agentur, 2023). Vienna has been the primary destination for Ukrainian children. The Vienna Board of Education has implemented various initiatives to facilitate their integration into the Austrian education system. Two options were offered to the children: integration into a standard class or placement in a "New-in-Vienna" class (Neu-in-Wien Klasse). The New-in-Vienna classes were designed for students who did not get a place in a regular class. In these classes, the children were supervised by two teachers, one German-speaking and one Ukrainian-speaking teacher. The tandem approach of the teachers, whereby one teacher taught in German and the other teacher communicated with students in their mother tongue (L1), was initially highly beneficial, as per the parents' feedback. The New-in-Vienna classes were a special form of German support classes and a temporary measure for teaching students from Ukraine. Since September 2022, these classes have been called classes with a focus on German-Ukrainian (KSDU – Klassen mit Schwerpunkt Deutsch-Ukrainisch). The primary goal was not only to give children a structured everyday life but also enable them to develop cognitively (Vasylchenko, 2023).

In order to enhance educational and career prospects, it is an explicit goal of the Austrian education system to promote the language skills of children and young people in primary educational institutions and schools, since language skills are fundamental to successful learning processes and educational pathways as well as social participation and social advancement (BMBWF, 2021). According to the Ministry of Education, the command of German as a language of instruction (L2) is necessary as it is the basis for active participation in educational processes and



therefore a criterion for academic achievement (BMBWF, 2019). Pupils who enter the Austrian education system as lateral entrants must be able to speak German in order to be able to function in Austrian schools and realize future prospects - just like pupils who speak German at home and are therefore lucky enough to be at little linguistic disadvantage (Dirim & Pokitsch, 2018). Gogolin criticizes the monolingual orientation of the school and describes it as the monolingual habitus of a multilingual school. According to her research, the monolingual self-image is one of those moments of structural inertia of the institutions of the education system, which must be overcome in the multilingual context (Gogolin, 2008). More recent approaches argue in favor of involving the L1 in second language acquisition in various ways, for example, Levine (2011) argues that appropriate use of the L1 is useful and even valuable for L2 learning and by involving the L1 in the classroom, L2 learners become more actively engaged and this leads to better language acquisition. Cummins (2007) also notes that the conscious use of students' L1 can act as a form of scaffolding for higher language performance. This all leads to the concept of translanguaging as defined by Otheguy et al. (2015), where the entire linguistic repertoire of a speaker is taken into consideration. For this reason, the organization of classes for Ukrainian children, where the teachers worked in tandem, seems to make sense. On the one hand, children's L1 was a great support in the process of L2 learning and helped, on the other hand, to reduce anxiety associated with the experience of fleeing.

Methods. It was essential to ascertain how the integration process of Ukrainian children into the school system works and how they deal with a new foreign language, new classmates, and educators. A case study which is embedded in qualitative research was chosen as a research design. In case study research, the researcher observes a phenomenon or takes interviews to look for similarities, patterns and relationships between patterns (Ridder, 2020). The central feature is the focus on individual units such as people, groups or organizations, i.e. individuals in a social science sense (Lamnek, 2016). Caspari und Grünwald (2022) assume that more general structures manifest themselves in individual cases beyond what is specific to them. The interviews, which were selected as the data collection method, were conducted in May - June 2022, with the respondents being the mothers of Ukrainian schoolchildren who had entered the Austrian school system. Three respondents took part in the interviews. The number of children is seven, namely, one child aged 6, one - 9, three - 11 and one - 15. The questions asked were about observations of their children's behaviour and mood after school, as well as children's stories about the classroom atmosphere, communication with friends and teachers, and learning German. The responses provided a further opportunity to identify factors that contributed to stress reduction in the classroom and, therefore, facilitating the emotional and psychological integration of Ukrainian schoolchildren into the new German-speaking educational environment. The analysis of the collected data allowed concluding the factors that positively influence the integration process of Ukrainian children in Vienna schools.

Results. The interviews with the Ukrainian mothers revealed that children who attended New-in-Vienna classes were in their native language environment and considered it an advantage. Initially, the mothers found it particularly helpful that



there were two teachers, one of whom spoke the children's first language, and that the children did not feel overloaded. However, the situation was quite different if the child was enrolled in a regular class and had to adapt immediately to a completely new language environment without support in L1. It was a huge stress for children because most of them had never learned German before. Without any knowledge of German, sitting in regular lessons, they not only had to deal with the new foreign language but also with the content of the subject. Firstly, the children felt overwhelmed. Nevertheless, the progress in German language skills became noticeable much more quickly compared to the children who attended the New-in-Vienna classes. The process of integration and socialization was also much more active.

From the conversations with mothers, it became clear that there were different stories of the integration into a new community even within one family. Here are some examples.

One mother recounts the school situation of her three sons. All three of them attend regular classes: the youngest son attended year 4 at primary school, and the other two went to a grammar school. The eldest son was 15 at that moment and the middle son was 11. According to their mother, the youngest and eldest sons were particularly lucky with their new classes. It depended on different factors. Regarding the youngest son, he liked his teacher, who was very attentive and empathetic. From the very beginning, she prepared additional materials and activities for him, so that this child could participate in learning with other schoolchildren. Thus, this child was so well integrated into the learning process that he was able to participate in everything and did not remain speechless. He was never bored, had a good rapport with his classmates, and walked to school every morning with great joy.

The eldest son (15 years old) attended a school with extensive music lessons in Ukraine before the war and played a musical instrument himself. In Vienna, the mother found a school class where the teenagers had music as their main subject and were interested in art. In this way, the eldest son found like-minded people and took part in various activities together, even outside the school. This played a decisive role in his successful integration process. The middle son, however, did not feel so comfortable in comparison to his brothers. He took part in lessons with all the other students, but he did not understand anything because he did not speak German. He was not given any additional materials to make him feel involved in the learning process. As a result, he was demotivated to go to school, socialize and had no desire to learn.

I was able to get such a precise description from Olha (the mother of three sons) because she was an English teacher herself and saw the whole situation from her teacher's perspective, so it was possible to take a look behind the scenes.

Other mothers could only evaluate the situation by questioning their children and keeping an eye on their mood or desire to attend school.

Nevertheless, I have also received informative reports from them. Julia told me about her daughter (Nastja), who was in Year 1 at secondary school. Nastja did not know German at that moment, but she was a very open-minded and sociable girl. In her case, her knowledge of German did not play any role in terms of communicating with her classmates. As far as the subject matter was concerned, she said that she



understood what the lessons were about (the teacher explained a lot of things to her in English), and she did not feel overwhelmed – quite the opposite. She enjoyed talking about her Austrian teacher, and how empathetic she was, how friendly and kind-hearted. The factors such as a nicely furnished classroom and delicious food also played an important role in her feeling at ease in the new environment.

Nastja had an older brother who was 15. According to his words, he did not feel stressed. He spoke good English, not bad German, so he did not have any language barriers. Instead, he made new friends, did not feel overwhelmed by the situation at his new school, and even at the moment of our conversation he had already integrated quite well.

The next example is connected with two sisters. The younger one started school in Vienna without any knowledge of German; however, she had an advantage. There was a girl in her class who knew her L1, became a contact person for Sofia, and supported her. Sofia's older sister was in Year 1 at secondary school. She only started learning German in Ukraine in September before the beginning of the war but did not know much yet. The family found a solution to improve her German skills. After school, she had a Zoom meeting every day with her grandmother, who was a German teacher in Ukraine and taught her German.

The majority of students from Ukraine keep working on their homework in the afternoon, which is regularly sent by the Ukrainian school, checked and graded by Ukrainian teachers. In the beginning, it was an enormous effort for children, but no one wanted to lose the connection with their home country, their own class, and the Ukrainian school program.

Discussion. In New-in-Vienna classes, pupils who were supervised by German-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking teachers, experienced less stress because of the connection to and supporting in their L1 and adapted more smoothly compared to those who were immediately placed in regular classes without such support. Therefore, it can be concluded that the involvement of L1 in the learning process leads to stress reduction and corresponds to the concept of school as a safe place established today. A school can be a place that is stable and reliable and creates a positive atmosphere through trusting relationships. One of its main tasks is to create an environment for a child that is free from the fears that have caused the trauma, give the child the opportunity to restore emotional safety, build trust and feel that nothing bad can happen to him or her. 'The safe place' is part of the pedagogical concept of trauma (Bausum et al., 2013) and offers a transitional space after a stressful experience in which trust can be restored, as well as development and growth (Plutzer, 2021).

A positive self-concept is very important for the successful acquisition of L2 and has a lasting impact on learning success. Like other children with a migrant background, the Ukrainian refugee children accepted into the Austrian school system are considered 'exceptional' pupils who are either unable to follow the German language of instruction well enough or not at all (hence 'exceptional'). In order to be considered an 'ordinary' student, their language skills are tested at specified intervals using a Mika-D test. This is a measuring instrument for analyzing the level of competence in German. The main aim is to determine whether the child can follow the German language of instruction. The results of the Mika-D test have an impact on the



pupil's career by determining how they will continue in the next school year and in which class. This test-taking caused many difficulties not only because of the lack of competencies in German but also because of a stressful situation, the kids had been through. Fleeing, the feelings of fear, loss, and defenselessness are something that no human being should experience. War experiences are among the worst experiences a child can be exposed to. It is a situation that very spontaneously takes a person out of their comfort zone. Children need a secure base and secure attachments. All of this was torn down overnight. All of this creates trauma as an enormous burden for children and their parents. You feel completely different, devastated, and helpless. The stress of the traumatic situation is not only expressed psychologically but also physically. Much research has been devoted to the relationship between emotional and psychological aspects, traumatic experiences, and the impact on learning capacity. Everyone knows the expression "Fear makes you stupid." But there is a scientific explanation for this: "If intense feelings (fear, anger, joy, tension) arise before a learning process, it takes some time until the affective excitement subsides and settles down to a medium level suitable for learning" (Metzig & Schuster, 2020, p. 331). According to Lozanov's study results, high performance of the brain occurs when there is complete mental and physical relaxation (cf. Lozanov 1978, quoted in Castner & Koch, 1993, p. 22). Measurements of brain waves, heart rate and breathing rhythm have shown that slowing down all processes in the student's body during the learning process leads to increased learning and memorisation. The state in which the brain can work optimally is called the alpha-state, which promotes stress-free and anxiety-free learning (Castner & Koch, 1993). If this important prerequisite for meaningful learning and retention is not met, it can mean that cognitive processes and integration into the group or classroom at school may be impaired.

According to Lundquist-Mog and Widlok, promoting emotional and psychological development is fundamental to strengthening self-confidence, socialisation in the new conditions of forced migration, enabling interaction and communication. This psychosocial level is also an important factor in learning a foreign language (Lundquist-Mog & Widlok, 2015). Bausum believes that one of the most important factors of resilience is the joy of life, which needs to be learned again. People learn and remember best when they are emotionally engaged. This also applies to positive feelings of joy, fun, happiness and pride (Bausum et al., 2013). A similar conclusion has been made by Bruchholz and Tscherny who emphasize the importance of feelings of joy which can successfully counteract traumatic experiences (Bruchholz & Tscherny, 2016). Lang and co-authors are convinced that for children and adolescents with emotionally distressing experiences, it is necessary to make a new corrective experience in the field of their emotional experiences. It is necessary to add joy and confidence, lightness and elation to their baggage, which supports optimism and creativity in thoughts and actions (Lang et al., 2013). Plutzer adds that it is a positive self-concept that contributes to success at school (Plutzer, 2021).

In the context of foreign language learning, in our study of German as a medium of instruction, the approach developed by Hans Reich plays an important role, according to which a resource-based understanding of the development of bilingualism in a migrant society is possible. In addition, he emphasises the



importance of cooperation between teachers of different subjects, as well as the need to integrate students' mother tongue into school curricula (Atamaca et al., 2023). The position of scholars who note that when the natural use of one's own language is lost, the feeling of helplessness and insecurity becomes stronger (Grindberg & Grindberg, 1990; Kronsteiner, 2003). It is in the context of forced migration that there is a threat of losing the natural use of the mother tongue. Plutzar believes that feelings of powerlessness and anger are closely related to the experience of so-called 'speechlessness' (Sprachlosigkeit) and belong to the emotional dimension of language (Plutzar, 2021). She emphasizes that the loss of a mother tongue (L 1) can be seen as a loss of self and identity. Therefore, it is important, according to Plutzar, to create a safe space in which both languages, the mother tongue (L 1), and the new foreign language (L 2), have their place and interact (Plutzar, 2019).

Conclusions. Drawing from the experiences of different above-mentioned families, it is evident that the successful integration of Ukrainian students into the Austrian school system relies on the following key factors:

- creating a relaxed and carefree atmosphere conducive to learning;
- organizing a game-oriented learning process and developing activity-oriented competence;
- using as many different learning channels as possible;
- preparing tasks that are differentiated by the level of mastery of the material;
- demonstrating good diagnostic skills and abilities to give feedback to children;
- using a variety of materials and forms of work tailored to a specific learning group;
- offering learners a choice of different tasks and approaches.

If the aforementioned factors are taken into account, a school becomes a place characterized by stability and reliability, promotes emotional and psychological balance, strengthens self-confidence, positive self-esteem, self-respect, freedom and creativity of thinking, and thus creates optimal environment for learning of the new language and the integration into the Austrian education system.

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