



# Successful practices and lessons learned: Ukrainian students in Swedish and Finnish schools

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## Summary

The integration of Ukrainian refugee students into schools in Finland and Sweden is a crucial aspect of their adaptation to new circumstances. This policy brief draws on a qualitative study conducted in the spring of 2022 and fall of 2023, focusing on the successful practices and lessons learned in this context (Petäjaniemi, Brinch, Kaukko & Lund, forthcoming). The study emphasizes the need to improve the inclusion process for Ukrainian students, which involves spreading information on effective practices, providing school staff with emotional support and training on post-traumatic stress syndrome, and facilitating peer interaction.

## Main points

- In light of the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees, temporary protection measures have been implemented. Due to the high number of women and children among the Ukrainian refugees arriving in Nordic countries, the status of newly arrived students is given special emphasis.
- Based on our research, successful practices for pedagogical and social inclusion are characterized by the following: 1) School leaders must possess organizational skills that can be adapted to provide flexible support to Ukrainian refugee students with diverse needs. This includes sometimes going beyond their regular responsibilities and providing continuous support to teachers working with these students, 2) recruiting and having a diverse school staff that shares the newly arrived students' mother tongue and/or migration experiences, c) developing pedagogical support – such as screening students' knowledge levels at the local school and supporting their current knowledge level – and 3) providing emotional support and job counseling for teachers and school staff working with refugee students who have faced traumatic experiences.
- Lessons learned from our research are: 1) It is important to spread information on previous experiences of working with newly arrived students to all school staff at all grade levels, 2) it is vital to support and develop social inclusion, identifying the prerequisites for interaction between Ukrainian students and long-term residents and native students, as well as 3) it is key to develop systematic ways to communicate with students' families and inform them both about how the school system works and about the roles of different occupational groups in the local school.

## School systems and the inclusion of Ukrainian students

After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and the ensuing war, over 6 million Ukrainians have fled their country to neighboring countries and beyond. Many of them registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe (UNHCR 2023). During the spring of 2022 and the fall of 2023, Finland and Sweden received over 64,000 and 52,000 Ukrainian refugees, respectively (Finnish Immigration Service 2023, Swedish Migration Service 2023). One of the most crucial institutions in the lives of young individuals is school. Research has shown that, during the settlement in a new country, it is essential for refugee students to be included in a school. This is important for several reasons: 1) to maintain and improve the level of knowledge and language acquisition (Bunar 2021), 2) to create routines and structures for their everyday life (Brinch & Lund, forthcoming), 3) to create a sense of belonging and safety (Tajic & Lund 2022) and 4) to promote feelings of “ordinariness” through peer interaction at school, thus, to give them the sense they are like everyone else in their new context (Tajic & Lund 2022).

Previous research has shown that schools have specific objectives and practices to guide their actions regarding newly arrived students, including both formal policies and informal practices (Bunar 2021). Strengthening the pedagogical and social inclusion of newly arrived students is possible when local schools use their previous experiences and lessons learned to support organizational learning. School staff have the dual role of conveying knowledge and values that promote inclusion, while also guarding against negative stereotyping that can lead to exclusion and marginalization (Lund & Lund, 2016; Petäjaniemi, Kaukko & Haswell, in review). This is especially crucial for newly arrived students without access to social networks in the country they have migrated to (Petäjaniemi, Brinch, Kaukko & Lund, forthcoming, Lund, A. & Ramsby, 2001). Both Finland and Sweden offer preparatory education to newly arrived students, either separately or through direct immersion, each approach having its advantages and challenges (Tajic & Bunar 2023). The support systems for preparatory education for newly arrived students range from targeted strategies in Finland to mixed provision between universal approaches and targeted strategies in Sweden. In Sweden, the decision concerning which approach to take is made by the organizer of the specific school. Given these insights, it is particularly important to understand how

existing practices have been implemented and whether they have changed while incorporating newly arrived refugee students from Ukraine. Moreover, to ensure inclusion processes, it is key to explore in which respects the welcoming of Ukrainian students follows previous and established routines.

## Changing practices of accommodation: newly arrived students at Swedish and Finnish schools

The study collected data from 18 interviews conducted at one school in Sweden, and five interviews conducted at two schools in Finland. All the schools are situated in urban areas: The school in Sweden is located in one of the bigger cities, and the two schools in Finland are located in midsized cities. In total, the study included interviews with five newly arrived Ukrainian refugee students between the ages of 14 and 15, one caregiver, and 17 school staff members, including school principals, teachers, a multilingual classroom assistant, a student counselor, a study and career counselor, and administrators. The study analyzed both formal and informal approaches to supporting Ukrainian students.

At the Swedish school, practices had changed in several ways compared to previous experiences of working with newly arrived students. For instance, the school decided to screen the Ukrainian refugee students' knowledge at the school with their teachers, instead of relying on a central institution for that task, which is the typical procedure. The goal of this screening was to integrate the students into the Swedish curriculum while at the same time supporting knowledge levels in, for example, mathematics, as the general level of mathematics in Ukraine was perceived to be higher than at the same grade level in Sweden. Additionally, resources were allocated to ensure there were Ukrainian-speaking teachers and multilingual teacher assistants available throughout the year. This was seen as particularly important given the large number of Ukrainian students, but it was also built on previous organizational learning that acknowledges the importance of having this resource at the school. In addition, the school already had a permanently employed teacher whose native language was Ukrainian, which made realizing this goal easy. In comparison, some schools in Finland even struggled to hire Ukrainian interpreters and instead utilized Russian interpreters. At schools where this occurred, students may have felt unwelcome and that the severity of the war they had fled from was not being acknowledged.

Ukrainian teachers in Sweden acted as professional links between the school system and the Swedish language, and together with the rest of the school staff they provided emotional support to the students through empathy and shared personal experiences. Staff members' personal involvement in their professional work was beneficial for newly arrived students, particularly when school staff had experience of language learning during a migration process, belonged to minority groups, or worked with students who had experienced racism. This has also been the case with school integration among other newly arrived students (Lund 2021). The school staff with a Ukrainian background also served as cultural translators concerning the Ukrainian culture and school curriculum, which was valuable for the Swedish school staff. While the emotional responsibility of teachers was acknowledged in Finland, where they were offered job counseling and an emotional support system, these services were not provided in the Swedish school. In both Sweden and Finland, there were concerns about the social integration of Ukrainian students, and the school staff reflected critically on their own need to develop professional strategies to facilitate interaction between Ukrainian students and other students at the school. We need to acknowledge that, for students, school represents both a knowledge project and a relational project and that these are inherently interconnected (Lundström 2020).

Previous experience of receiving newly arrived students differed between Sweden and Finland, and this is likely a key reason for the different practices of accommodating Ukrainian students. Sweden has introduced a new law to provide equal educational opportunities for newly arrived students in compulsory school, including several measures to support the educational needs of these students. As a result, the term "newly arrived student" became official, and national guidelines were available for school organizers, principals, and teachers. In the

Finnish legislation, there is no special status for “newly arrived students.” In Finland, the two schools under study had some experience of working with migrant students, but generally speaking the Finnish school system has a shorter history than the Swedish system of working with and learning from newly arrived students and their families. The Swedish educational policies and specific schools were thus better prepared to integrate newly arrived students, particularly regarding pedagogical inclusion. In 2015, a large number of refugees arrived in Sweden, prompting schools and educational policies to adapt and learn how to best support these students. When Ukrainian students arrived in 2022, the prior organizational learning from 2015 played a crucial role in helping the school in Sweden to accommodate them.

Despite this overall trend, the Swedish school’s organizational learning was not spread throughout the entire school, as primary responsibility for educating newly arrived students was placed on a few individuals. The age range among the newly arrived Ukrainian students in the Swedish school was wider than among the refugees arriving in 2015, thus affecting teachers working with students across all grades and age levels, from 9 to 16 years old. Similarly, in the two Finnish schools, a small group of preparatory education teachers not only taught newly arrived Ukrainian students but also provided consultancy and in-service training to newly hired teachers and principals. In this way, the education of Ukrainian students in Swedish and Finnish schools relied heavily on a few key individuals. This highlights the need for local schools to actively preserve, nurture, and share their organizational learning related to newly arrived students, informing school staff within the entire organization as well as new teachers about effective practices. This is vital to ensuring a sense of security and fairness among newly arrived students at their new school (Kaukko, Petäjaniemi & Harju-Autti et al. 2023).

Another key finding in the study regarding the inclusion process within schools is the importance of both students and their caregivers feeling safe and well-informed about the school system, the school year calendar, the occupational groups, and their respective areas of expertise and responsibility. In both Sweden and Finland, it was challenging for schools to communicate with newly arrived families online through learning platforms. Additionally, in Sweden, it became apparent that more information was required about the different occupational roles within the school, such as student counselor and career counselor. In the context of students' integration into school and their future path, it is crucial to introduce them to the division of labor within the school, e.g., the roles of different professional groups and their expertise. School counselors and career counselors are essential for newly arrived students, who may not be familiar with the school system and student support structure in Finland and Sweden. In both Finland and Sweden, the schools allowed students who moved out of the residential area due to local housing policies to continue studying at the school, even without municipal resources. Sweden and Finland also offered individualized flexibility in determining how long each student attended the preparatory class and when to transition to mainstream classes. This created a sense of stability for the families and the children in a situation marked by temporariness.

## Lessons learned: from dissemination practices to peer interaction

The study shows that several lessons were learned alongside the successful practices in both Sweden and Finland. The school as an organization needs to share past experiences of working with newly arrived students with all school staff and at all grade levels to be prepared for the influx of newly arrived students. The school staff recognized the importance of understanding the school system the Ukrainian students had left, along with having staff who could speak the students' first language. It is important to consider the potential risks of students feeling excluded from the school community or unable to demonstrate their school knowledge in their strongest language.

The study highlights the need to provide emotional and social support to Ukrainian students, as well as the importance of systematically strengthening emotional support for school staff working with newly arrived

students. In Finnish schools, support services (e.g., work counseling for preparatory teachers, and low-threshold assistance for multicultural education-related issues) were available and highly appreciated by the teachers. Indeed, trauma and insecurities experienced by Ukrainian students require school staff who can be not only physically but also emotionally present.

Another lesson learned based on the study, is the need for stronger social inclusion processes for Ukrainian students, which is important for all newly arrived students. Traditional school knowledge and language acquisition are typically given priority over social inclusion, even though strengthening the social dimensions of schooling could improve the former (Tajic & Lund, 2022). Currently, inclusion processes for Ukrainian students in schools are more focused on pedagogical issues than on promoting friendship and peer interaction with other students at the school. Research shows that when teachers take collective responsibility for integrating newly arrived students, they act as role models for the students' interactions (Tajic & Lund 2022). This implies that native students also see it as a matter of course to socialize with the newly arrived students.

## Policy recommendations

1. The National Agencies for Education in Nordic countries need to acknowledge that knowledge acquisition and social relations are interconnected; the agencies are encouraged to identify the best practices concerning how schools can work to develop methods to strengthen social inclusion processes for newly arrived students.
2. Schools are encouraged to provide emotional support for school staff working with newly arrived students, such as offering work counseling for preparatory teachers and low-threshold assistance for multicultural education-related issues.
3. Schools are encouraged to further develop and share good practices concerning how to make the school system transparent for newly arrived students and their caregivers.
4. School leaders are encouraged to see the potential in organizational rules and practices, including policies in areas other than education, to provide flexible support for Ukrainian students with diverse needs. For example, in both Finland and Sweden, the schools allowed students who moved out of the residential area due to local housing policies to continue studying at the school, even without municipal resources.
5. Organizational learning concerning pedagogical and social inclusion is key to knowledge building. Such learning processes should include the whole school and all staff. This will enable all staff members to assume responsibility for newly arrived students, which again may facilitate increased peer interaction among existing and newly arrived students.

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The recommendations in this Policy Brief are based on results from the research project INFLUX, with funds from NORDFORSK (ref.no 161678). Collaborators in INFLUX are shown in the bottom line.

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