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*Studia paedagogica*. 2023, vol. 28, iss. 2, pp. [97]-118

ISSN 1803-7437 (print); ISSN 2336-4521 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/SP2023-2-5>


Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78478>

Access Date: 27. 02. 2024

Version: 20230727

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## UKRAINIAN PARENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH CZECH PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES AND ROLES FOR PARENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Even though school-based parental involvement has been linked to academic and behavioral benefits for children, little is known about the links between parental involvement for Ukrainian refugee families and contextual factors such as Czech language fluency, teaching styles, and student assessment. Identifying the barriers and limitations to cooperation between the home and the school might contribute to helping refugee children adjust to their new life in the host country. The article presents the results of a study with an exploratory qualitative approach using interviews and an interpretative phenomenological analysis for data interpretation. The study was designed to explore the multiple barriers that refugee families face when engaging with their children's Czech public schools. The results revealed that Ukrainian parents encountered a number of challenges and that a welcoming school environment was crucial for involving them in their child's school.

### KEYWORDS

refugee parental school involvement; children of Ukrainian refugees; lived experiences; home-school cooperation; barriers to communication

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## Introduction

Due to the Russian Federation's military offensive against Ukraine, launched on 24 February 2022, thousands of Ukrainians have been forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries. The rise in the number of refugees in the European Union has created an unprecedented challenge to host countries and their educational systems (Eurydice report, 2022). Given the current massive influx of refugees into the Czech Republic, it is both timely and important to conduct the present research, as policies related to welcoming refugees are inextricably linked with integration into a society, including into its educational system.

Investigating home–school cooperation, the study is designed to explore multiple barriers that refugee families face when engaging with their children's Czech public schools. Although the varying roles of parents in supporting their own children's learning have been discussed, little is known about the parental involvement of Ukrainian refugee families or about their parental role in Czech public schools. Home–school cooperation is at the foreground of this study, shedding light on issues concerning the socioeconomic status of refugees and the self-selected roles of the parents engaging with Czech public schools.

Identifying the barriers and limitations of Ukrainian refugee parental involvement can help in recognizing the roles of the parents in school-based communication, particularly in their interactions with the school and in the quality of parent–teacher relationships. The role parents play in their children's education is an important factor in acclimatizing refugee children to their new life in the host country. Little is known about the ways schools engage with Ukrainian refugee parents in the Czech Republic or about their schooling experiences; this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of affairs. Schools can play a very important role in the lives of refugees. They can offer social opportunities for the newly arrived refugee children and serve as a starting point in managing their assimilation into their new communities through a sense of school belonging (Almqvist & Broberg, 1999; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008). Drawing on research from previous refugee waves in other countries, and given that refugee parents face additional stress associated with experiences of torture and trauma, changes in family roles, separation or death of family members, language difficulties, and different cultural expectations (Gonsalves, 1992; Lamberg, 1996), this article examines the key needs of refugees when enrolling their children in public schools. It is hoped that some propositions included in this article could be used to facilitate the successful inclusion of Ukrainian learners in the national education system, such as a holistic model of integration in education that responds to the learning, social, and emotional needs of refugee students and their parents.

## **1 Theoretical background: Parents' importance in children's education**

Previous research on parents' engagement in the school education of their children has weighed heavily in favor of school–parent collaboration. Parental participation in the schooling of their children has been evaluated by many researchers, educators, parents, and national governments as a positive ingredient in children's education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parental involvement has become an internationally accepted norm because of its benefits for students, schools, and the parents themselves (Comer, 2005). The involvement of parents in children's education is associated with success in many different areas of student development, including positive behavior, decreased truancy, and a better disposition toward learning (Jeynes, 2005). It is essential to note that the level of socioeconomic resources available to parents determines the extent to which parents can commit financial, human, and social resources to the child's education (Mayer, 1997). The family income, parental occupation, and educational background influence the level of parental involvement in a child's education and play a great role in parental involvement decisions.

A large body of literature links parental involvement and student achievement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Comer, 2005; Couchenour & Chrisman, 2008; DeHass, 2005). Parental involvement has been shown to increase children's positive attitudes toward school, as well as to improve their attendance and homework habits (Prior & Gerard, 2007). According to Prior and Gerard (2007), when parents are involved in their children's education, the children tend to see a connection between their home and school. Other studies have shown a relationship between parental involvement and students' higher test scores (Cotton & Wikeland, 2001). The literature also noted that parental support in the form of providing academic resources, enriching activities, and helping children with additional instructions are linked with better test scores.

Studies have shown that parental involvement is related to benefits for the school, too. Improving parental involvement in schools is greatly significant for facilitating higher academic standards (Machen et al., 2005). Schools that have more parental involvement tend to have higher teacher interest and enthusiasm for their jobs than schools with low levels of parental involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parental involvement offers various benefits to families, such as better connections among parents, children, and communities; increased support and services to families; and improved family relationships (Harris & Wilmer, 2004). Comer (2005) stated that higher involvement levels among parents motivate the parents themselves to advance their own education and get better

jobs that were previously unattainable. Another advantage of parental involvement includes the ability to communicate the importance of education to their children (Lareau, 2000). González-Mena (2006) posited that when parental involvement takes the form of family support that engages both parents in the learning process of their child, it promotes strong parent-child relationships.

Types of parental involvement in the education process of children have been widely investigated (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000). Some researchers conceptualize parental involvement as a multi-dimensional construct. Epstein (1995) conceived six different forms of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and community collaboration. Epstein's approach was based on the theory of overlapping spheres of three social organizations – the family, the school, and the community – and their influence on the context in which students learn and grow. The best results are achieved through their cooperative action and support. This approach posits that each form of parental involvement has its own goals. *Parenting* helps all families to establish home environments to support children as students and helps schools to understand families; *communicating* designs and conducts effective forms of two-way communication about school programs and children's progress; *volunteering* recruits and organizes parental help and support; *learning at home* provides information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities; *decision making* includes parents in school governance; and *community collaboration* identifies and integrates resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Kohl et al. (2000) considered Epstein's forms of parental involvement to be well-defined; however, they are teacher and school-initiated rather than parent-initiated. To provide a broader understanding of the concept of parental involvement, Kohl et al. (2000) described forms of parental involvement from another perspective using a three-dimensional model aimed at measuring the quality of parental involvement: the quality of the relationship between parent and teacher, the teacher's perception of the parent's value of education, and the parent's satisfaction with the child's school. These dimensions of parental involvement impact student academic achievement and social development differently. Regular parent-teacher contact facilitates children's school progress and promotes the parents' assistance with their children's homework; the teacher's perception of the parent's value of education helps to estimate the importance of education in the family and contributes to a positive attitude toward it; parent endorsement of the school reflects parents' beliefs that the school is a good place for the child to be and that the school is preparing the child for the future (Kohl et al., 2000). The forms of parental involvement are

closely connected to the roles that parents perform. Therefore, parents are viewed as supporters when they are involved in the at-home learning process, which includes discussing school affairs, encouraging their learning processes, offering cognitive-intellectual support by reading, visiting museums or libraries, and helping with homework (Paseka & Killus, 2022). Home–school cooperation involves different roles for parents: opponents, clients, actors, experts, customers, and partners. Parents are not always able to choose the most suitable role for themselves in the education process.

Research has shown that there is an apparent congruence between parents' involvement and educational expectations for their children. Thus, parents who hold higher expectations are more involved in both home-based and school-based activities. They support their children with their homework and with classroom and school activities, and they create a home environment and conditions that support schoolwork (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Existing data have shown that parents' expectations for their children's education vary by socioeconomic status, immigrant status, and gender (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). Different expectations are the result of specific regional or group cultural norms and values. It is interesting to note that in European countries, immigrant parents have had significantly higher expectations for the educational attainment of their children than nonimmigrant parents have (Wiseman & Zhao, 2020).

## **2 The background to refugees in the Czech Republic**

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Czech Republic has followed a welcoming policy for Ukrainian refugees and has tried to integrate them into Czech society through various initiatives. The Czech government has made efforts to accommodate refugees by supporting them financially so they can have access to Czech public schools and medical services and have free access to the labor market. The government has called the refugee services “temporary protection,” emphasizing that the refugees will be repatriated to their home country in a year or the protection will be extended for another six months depending on the situation. The Czech Republic has played a significant role as a host country to over 400,000 Ukrainian refugees and the level continues to rise (UNHCR, 2022). According to figures from the Czech Statistical Office and a Czech governmental report on migration and integration of foreigners released in July 2022, the number of foreigners registered as living in the Czech Republic excluding Ukrainian refugees increased from 76,000 in 1993 to 660,849 in 2022 (Czech Republic Parliament Report, 2022; Czech Statistical Office, 2022).

In theory, host countries whose education systems are already burdened with serious issues can benefit from refugee migration, since donor funding can improve the quality of education in general, for both refugees and the host country's students. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) updated education strategy for 2030 explicitly supports this approach, calling it "the best policy option" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 6) for refugees and for host countries. Given the number of refugees who are school-age children, the language barrier might make home–school cooperation difficult and may cut down on parents' involvement (Muhič, 2011).

Immigrant children's education is also influenced by their culture of origin. Průcha (2006) claimed that Czech teachers often have problems communicating with pupils who are members of different ethnic or religious groups. Another significant problem for immigrant children at Czech schools seems to be evaluation and classification. Průcha (2006) stated that teachers do not know how to classify pupils whose communication ability is strongly affected by their limited Czech proficiency; he indicated that Czech faculties of education do not prepare their students to teach immigrant children. According to the Teacher and Learning International Survey 2018 (OECD, 2019), which asked teachers about their preparedness for teaching in multicultural diversity, Czech teachers expressed low readiness to teach multicultural classes and reported a high need for professional development in teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting.

Taking into account the fact that the number of immigrants coming to the Czech Republic has greatly increased in recent years, a significant policy question emerges: how can refugees be integrated into a national economy while simultaneously maintaining or improving their wellbeing?

### **3 Access to Czech schools for refugees**

Various approaches to the integration of newly arrived migrants and refugees in schools are the subject of ongoing debate. Newly arrived learners may initially spend a larger proportion of their time in separate classes focused on learning the language of schooling, or they may be directly integrated into regular classes with other students (Eurydice report, 2019). Overall, the majority of European countries have adopted policies, regulations, and recommendations to guide schools in determining the educational needs of newly arrived refugee learners from Ukraine. However, there are national variations in these top-level policies (Eurydice report, 2022).

Within the fulfilment of the Conception of Integrating Aliens on the Territory of the Czech Republic, Czech public schools ensure Czech language classes free of charge for immigrant children (Act on Asylum, 325/1999).

In addition, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2022) initiated “Language courses for children of foreigners migrating from Ukraine 2022” to support intensive language learning for children arriving from Ukraine. The purpose is to increase refugee students’ skills in the Czech language and to reduce their risk of early school dropout. In response to a massive influx of Ukrainian refugees in March 2022, the legal framework was assessed as inadequate to the needs of the current situation; four new laws, collectively referred to as “Lex Ukraine,” were prepared. The last law, Act No. 67/2022 Coll., on Measures in the Area of Education in Connection with the Armed Conflict in Ukraine specifies the conditions under which it is possible to modify educational programs for individual students, and the possibilities of admitting new students in the current school year and in the next one. It promotes the initial integration of refugees into regular classes, provides classes with a teaching assistant to enable refugee children to receive intensive support, and enables the establishment of cooperation with Ukrainian teachers. Ukrainian learners may also be offered support for participating in distance learning based on the Ukrainian education system and curriculum.

According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences in July 2022, “about 57% of Ukrainian refugee children attended Czech primary/secondary schools in June. One-eighth of children in primary school age and one-fifth of high schoolers did not attend any schooling neither in Czech schools nor online in Ukraine” (Prokop et al., 2022, p. 5).

Taken together, the main prerequisites for successful integration are the preparedness of the school system and its ability to react to changing conditions. The policies that the Czech government has rapidly implemented in response to the emerging situation are noteworthy.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Research design

As the research project aims to analyze the personal experiences of Ukrainian refugee parents and to provide a description of the essence of a lived phenomenon experienced by participants, it adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach using a qualitative framework (Creswell & Porth, 2018). This phenomenological research seeks an in-depth understanding and explanation of a specific phenomenon through the lenses of refugee parents by using semi-structured interviews (Willis, 2007). According to Watters, et al. (2022), “Many scholars advocate the use of a qualitative research design as it values the participant’s unique viewpoint, offering a deeper and richer understanding of the complex phenomenon being explored (Bhaskar, 2008;



Bryman, 2012)'' (Watters, et al. 2022, p. 68). Therefore, this study is designed to address the experiences of Ukrainian refugee parents when engaging with Czech public schools using a qualitative methodology.

The research questions addressed are:

1. What are the challenges Ukrainian refugee parents encounter when engaging with Czech public schools?
2. What role do Ukrainian refugee parents give themselves in school-parent interaction?

#### *4.2 Participants and procedure*

According to Polkinghorne (1989), interviews with 5 to 25 people who have direct experience of an investigated phenomenon suffices for a qualitative study. This study incorporates reflexive inquiry with more focus on engaging in a critical dialogue with the participants (Quantz, 1992). Twelve participants were selected through a criterion sampling strategy used to identify and select all cases that met predetermined criteria of importance (Lester, 1999). The inclusion criteria were: have Ukrainian refugee background, arrived in the Czech Republic between February and June 2022, have an experience with the Czech public school system, be able to speak Russian, and be willing to share personal experience with the researcher.

The participants were drawn from an online forum on Facebook. They were informed about the purpose of the research, that participation and withdrawal during any phase of the data collection process was allowed, and that none of their personal information would be used in the study. Before the interviews, the participants were asked to sign a consent form. Interviews followed an interview schedule, lasted approximately one hour each, and were carried out in May and June 2022. Based on the preference of the participants, interviews were conducted in public spaces. It was suggested to the participants that they be interviewed in pairs as this kind of interviewing was emphasized in previous research as more communicative and accessible (Blake et al., 2021). However, out of the twelve participants, only one interview was conducted as a couple as the other eleven had resettled with children only and were currently single parents. When the participants were interviewed as a couple, special effort was made on the part of the interviewer to elicit a narrative from each participant, focusing on confirming similarities and differences throughout the interview.

The sample consisted of one male and eleven female participants with an average age of 38 years. Ten participants were married and two were single. All participants had at least one school-age child. Two participants were interviewed together as a couple (participants XI/XII) and ten participants were interviewed on their own (participants I-X). All of them had resettled in Prague.

### *4.3 Data collection and data analysis*

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to collect data as they are considered to be an effective way to establish respectful relationships with participants in close proximity to them and to obtain in-depth data (Kvale, 2007). Each interview consisted of 22 questions including questions about demographics related to gender, age, marital status, number and age of children, and location. The other questions in the interview were designed to detect the facilitating factors and barriers encountered by parents when engaging with Czech schools and to identify their role as parents in the Czech school. The parents were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences and were asked broad open-ended questions such as, "Could you tell me about your first interaction with a Czech school when enrolling your child?" Additional follow-up questions were posed to clarify parents' statements and confirm that the interviewer had understood correctly, "Can you tell me more about...?" Experiences of war were not part of the interview to eliminate the danger of traumatization.

For the purposes of maintaining parent confidentiality, each respondent was provided a respondent identity such as Participant I and so forth. All interviews were conducted in Russian as the participants and the researcher speak Russian fluently. The interviews were recorded with a mobile phone. Each interview was transcribed, checked for accuracy, and then translated into English by the researcher herself to achieve a translation as close as possible to the interviewer's insights regarding the participants (Yanay-Ventura et al., 2020). A "denaturalized" transcription ("full verbatim") was used, in which everything was left in, including utterances, mistakes, repetitions, and all grammatical errors (Bucholtz, 2000, as cited in McMullin, 2021, p. 141). The choice of this type of transcription is in line with the phenomenological approach applied in this study as the use of words is very important for the analysis.

The transcribed data were analyzed using the interpretative "phenomenological analysis" (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), the essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus, which is seen as directing the researcher's analytic attention toward participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. The analysis process has six stages; stages 1 to 4 follow a cyclical process (Smith, 2004):

#### ***Stage 1 Immersion in the data***

This stage involved reading and re-reading the transcript and becoming familiar with the participant's account. In order to "enter into the participant's world" (Reid et al., 2005, p. 66), the researcher actively engaged with the data by listening repeatedly to the audio-recordings, being immersed in them. Any text in the transcripts that might contribute toward understanding was highlighted.

***Stage 2 Writing exploratory comments***

This was a significantly important stage of the data analysis involving reading the transcription and writing exploratory comments. All other stages and emergent themes were built upon the work carried out in this stage. The transcription was read again and text that seemed important was underlined. Each underlined piece of text was then accompanied by a written account of why the underlined text was considered important.

***Stage 3 Identifying emerging themes***

The transcripts were read through again, with specific attention to the notes that were written in Stage 2. The main aim at this stage was to identify emerging themes from the underlined text in the transcriptions and specific notions highlighted in the researcher's notes. During the researcher's interpretations, the importance of "seeing" the world as it was experienced by participants (Finlay, 2013) was acknowledged by the researcher. When the transcript had been worked through in this way, it was possible to compile a complete listing of the emergent themes to identify the themes that connect the shared experiences of the participants. In the analysis, the researcher found two themes: "challenges of engaging with Czech public schools" and "parents' role in supporting their children in learning at Czech schools." In IPA, the themes at this stage are called "first-level themes" (Smith & Dunworth, 2003).

***Stage 4 Collating themes and grouping***

The main purpose of Stage 4 of the analysis was to collate themes that belonged together and that could be put into groups. According to conceptual similarities, the themes were grouped together and given a descriptive label that captured the thematic essence of the group (Smith & Dunworth, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). This stage enabled the researcher to capture the essence of the transcript and organize the data into second level themes (sub-themes) (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Theme 1 was broken down into three sub-themes.

***Stage 5 Move to the next participant.***

After proceeding through Stages 1 to 4, when one participant's transcription was completed, Stage 5 was considered as the next participant's transcription, and the same process from Stage 1 to 4 was repeated.

***Stage 6 Major themes across transcriptions***

When all research participant transcriptions were analyzed, clustered themes across the transcriptions of all participants were brought together in a list of major themes and sub-themes.

## 5 Findings

The study shows that Ukrainian refugee parents encountered a number of challenges when enrolling their children in Czech public schools. The participants were able to voice a myriad of concerns and identify a number of barriers to their children's school involvement.

Although each participant's experience and narrative are unique, some common themes emerged. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) resulted in the development of two major themes from the data collected: Theme 1: "Challenges of engaging with Czech public schools" and Theme 2 "Parents' role in supporting their children in learning at Czech schools". Theme 1 had three sub-themes: "poor language proficiency," "lack of information about the Czech education system," and "insufficient school capacity."

### ***Theme 1:*** Challenges of engaging with Czech public schools

#### ***Sub-theme 1:*** Poor language proficiency

All participants mentioned language as a key stressor because they cannot fully comprehend and communicate in Czech. This was best exemplified by participant I, the mother of a 12-year-old son, when she shared her experience of interaction with a public school without an interpreting service, "I was so stressed and my knowledge of Czech was limited. I understand that it can result in a poor adjustment to the new educational and cultural environment."

Participant III noted that poor language proficiency functioned as a barrier to her communication with the schoolteachers, "I feel annoyed with myself that I can't communicate with the teachers. I am doing my best to learn the Czech language but it takes time."

Participant IV stated that she had a lack of engagement stemming from her personal anxieties around speaking in Czech, "I feel very shy when I speak in Czech – it makes me feel extremely nervous. What if someone does not understand me? For this reason, I don't communicate with other parents in my son's class."

Participant VII perceived that her daughter felt ashamed of her mother's lack of fluency in Czech; therefore, this participant was less involved in school. When the researcher prodded Participant VII to explain her position, she stated that her daughter discouraged her from going to school and talking to teachers, saying, "My daughter keeps telling me that I don't have to go to school as I don't understand anything. She doesn't want to translate for me. I don't want to embarrass her while she is adjusting to her new school."

A higher language proficiency level is complementary to the school-parent collaboration and gives refugees a sense of social belonging.

***Sub-theme 2:*** Lack of information about the Czech education system

The analysis revealed that further frustrations arose due to a lack of information for parents about the education system in the Czech Republic. Participants suggested a need for a consultative service where parents could seek advice and support. This sub-theme depicts different ways the participants tried to gather information, “The first thing that came to my mind was to ask about enrollment process in a Facebook group” (participant I).

Participant XI was concerned about the lack of awareness of how the Czech school system operated. She was not certain if her son was eligible to be enrolled in a grammar school:

My son went to a grammar school in Ukraine, and I wanted to find some information about how to enroll in Czech grammar schools. I was afraid to go to a nearby grammar school due to my low level of proficiency in Czech. A friend of mine told me that there were consultative services that help parents and their children to orient themselves in the Czech education system and integrate into society. They suggested I visit a webinar in Ukrainian where I got all the necessary information.

***Sub-theme 3:*** Insufficient school capacity

Insufficient school capacity was another challenge. Four study participants were denied enrollment not only in catchment schools according to their place of residence but in the whole of Prague. Their only option was schools in Kladno, a city about 25 kilometers from their place of residence. Participant VIII stated:

We are told that there will be special buses to transport children from oversaturated locations to nearby villages or towns with more capacity. It would be great though still hard for children to go to school outside Prague on a regular basis. Now my daughter is attending school online in Ukraine, so we are going to try to enroll in a Prague school in the fall.

Participant II explained their non-enrollment as due to her intention to return to Ukraine as soon as possible, “I am planning an early return to Ukraine, which, however, may not be possible. Anyway, I don’t want my child to suffer from additional stress that a new school may cause.”

Participant XII assumed that school enrollment was linked to housing and parents’ employment but she chose to stay in Prague even though it was a saturated region, as is all of Central Bohemia. The participant shared:

I attended a meeting at school provided by the consultative service. They informed us that most schools must accept at least some Ukrainians pupils and that the number of Ukrainian pupils per class is really capped in Prague and partially in the Central Bohemian Region. They suggested that refugees

should relocate within the Czech Republic and make an effort to consider school, housing, and employment capacity as a whole. Now my daughter is attending a fully Ukrainian class which is an exception but could be more common after the fall enrollment wave.

The Czech government and schools maintain the distribution of Ukrainian parents and their children across many schools and regions in the Czech Republic but some parents prefer to wait for further school enrollments.

***Theme 2:*** Parents' role in supporting their children in learning at Czech schools

All twelve parents of this study indicated that the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education cannot be overemphasized. When reflecting on refugee parents' roles in supporting their children in learning and interacting with a Czech school, all study participants felt themselves very limited in their ability to cope with these roles for various reasons. Participant IX opined that, "The duty of the parents goes beyond sending their children to school. Now I have to work more than usual in order to provide a living. Thus, I spend limited time engaging in my child's academic progress." The parents were very conscientious when it came to their role as school supporters. While these refugee parents were not ready to offer hands-on academic support to their children due to Czech language barriers and a lack of content knowledge, most of them supported their children at home by structuring time for homework and school preparation and by motivating their children. Participant XII commented, "I do care a great deal about my son's education but I can't help him with his homework. I find it appropriate to trust his learning to the experts, I mean the teachers." Participant I expressed her concerns about her role in home-school cooperation, "I can honestly say that I feel guilty as I am constantly tired and stressed. Moreover, I don't know how to plan and organize my son's studies as I don't know how the Czech school system works."

Most participants regarded themselves as school supporters, and this role seemed more visible for them than other roles. It should be pointed out that the study participants admitted that they did not support their children as much as they had before. They appreciated all the assistance provided by Czech schools but stated that it was taking time to find their places in their new socioeconomic conditions.

Though most of the participants are mainly positive about their interaction with schools, some of them shared adverse experiences as well. Participant VII stated that her teenage daughter was reluctant to go to school:

When my daughter gets home, I ask her about school, homework, classmates, how well she performs at school. The biggest challenge is understanding

the content of the school subjects and instructions. My daughter thinks that the teachers aren't always helpful and resourceful. It makes my child feel bad. I wish there were a Ukrainian teaching assistant in my daughter's class.

Participant I expressed a feeling of dissatisfaction with some school staff:

The principal was extremely accommodating upon my arrival at the school. But I don't feel welcomed and accepted by all the school staff. If my child has a problem, they don't reach out to me to talk. But I understand that as they don't speak Ukrainian and my Czech is poor.

## 6 Discussion

This study described the challenges Ukrainian refugee parents met when engaging with Czech public schools and their role in school-parent interactions. Refugee families often have barriers to school involvement due to economic, linguistic, cultural, and life circumstances (Ramirez, 2003; Turney & Kao, 2009). The participants indicated mainly a language gap when they interact with school staff for their children in an education setting. While the findings of this study indicate that teachers are generally aware of the language problems of parents and children, they feel hopeless, as they are not given resources or opportunities to meet those needs. It is reasonable to infer that parents' active involvement in schools and in the wider community will increase in conjunction with their mastery of the Czech language.

The findings are consistent with previous research indicating that although parents talk about the relief of coming to a peaceful country, they also express the loss of social networks and family, social role and status, and issues with structural discrimination. Their lives are filled with insecurity, uncertainty, and bewilderment (Richman, 1998). Due to these factors, the participants especially appreciated that Czech schools fostered a welcoming environment and that the school staff strove to develop positive relationships, including showing an interest in parents' and children's personal experiences while displaying a level of empathy. A welcoming environment is instrumental in parents' feeling of being connected and becoming involved in the school environment. A review of refugee education in OECD countries indicated that language proficiency, physical and mental health, connections with peers and family, learning environments, teacher-student interactions, school engagement and assessment, and extra-curricular activities reduce refugee students' stress, enhance their learning, and speed trauma recovery (Cerna, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to support such factors in Czech schools.

A number of participants pointed out the insufficient capacity of public schools. As refugee education is considered a powerful strategy to promote

cultural understanding, refugee integration, and social cohesion (Karkouti et al., 2020; Tosten et al., 2017), it is vital that all refugee children have access to public schools. Schools can provide structure and restore a sense of normality to children's lives, particularly after war and forced migration (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Among the main reasons for non-enrollment were rejection by schools as well as lack of information about the enrollment process, the Czech school system, and the location of schools. Therefore, it is recommended to inform refugees about schooling and provide them with transport from oversaturated locations to nearby schools.

Besides structural barriers to school-based parent involvement, such as parents' low Czech proficiency and different cultural beliefs, the study revealed that the refugee parents' experienced increased stress in terms of their roles as parents when interacting with schools. Consistently in the discussions on parental involvement in their children's education, the Ukrainian refugee parents acknowledged that they may assume different roles: supporters, actors, consumers, and partners of schools. But for the reasons mentioned above, the parents seem to be lost, even though their engagement in schools plays a crucial role in their children's educational processes. These findings might encourage teaching staff to remain attentive to this complex issue and support refugee parents in addressing this concern, as parent educational involvement is an investment of the parents' resources in their children's schooling (Sheldon, 2003).

The study provides some suggestions for approaches that might be applied to improve school-parent collaboration. Given the challenges that refugee parents encounter when engaging with Czech public schools, one can conclude they need responsive help. The US National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has set standards that serve as recognizable and concrete guideposts for family engagement across the education system (National PTA, 2022, p. 2). The National PTA (2022) identifies six standards that help families, young people, and schools to interact and thrive, and to strengthen communities through school-parent collaboration: welcome all families; communicate effectively; support student success; speak up for every child; share power; and collaborate with the community.

Regarding diverse families as valued partners helps to facilitate a sense of belonging in the school community and makes families feel respected and understood. In order to create an accessible and family-friendly environment, schools may decorate interior hallways with colorful student art works, bulletin boards displaying current stories of student success and photos of families, and postings for families written in positive and friendly language. Two-way communication between parents and the school fosters respectful attitudes that are especially important for refugee families and students.



Surveys contribute to the exploration of families' meeting and communication preferences along with families' expectations of parent-teacher communication. Survey findings may guide teachers in developing communication plans with families. To equip teachers with effective communicative strategies for interaction with refugee families, special time during professional development days should be allocated. Professional coaches may support teachers by observing their conversations with parents and offering constructive feedback. Teacher training may assist teachers in responding effectively to refugee parents' needs by creating a welcoming environment. Teacher training should ensure a shift toward raising awareness of multicultural considerations and of the traumatic experiences of refugees who have gone through a resettlement process. Awareness of these potential challenges can give context to becoming more knowledgeable on how to approach parents in a supportive way using an integrative approach in order to involve them in school-parent collaboration.

Teaming up of families, students, and schools supports student success. As the results of this study revealed, Ukrainian refugee families lack information on the Czech school system. School workshops on possibilities and options for their child's educational future, including on the academic profile requirements necessary for entrance into selective programs during transition years (elementary to middle; middle to high), can ensure that families and students understand the potential pathways and opportunities for the future. As research shows, "family engagement matters for student success, students whose families are engaged are more likely to attend school, avoid discipline problems, achieve at higher levels and graduate" (National PTA, 2022, p. 2). Therefore, schools should create opportunities for engaging with families. Hosting family parties is a useful strategy for showcasing families' culture and talents. These parties provide parents with useful information about the school and give them an opportunity to meet and connect with other families. Refugee parents may be invited to be volunteers at the school. Invitations may originate from the school either through a specific teacher or staff person to a specific parent (e.g., the teacher invites the parent to volunteer in a classroom) or through general invitations for all parents to be involved with the school (Walker et al., 2005). General invitations for parent involvement from schools create a welcoming school environment, inform parents about school events, and give examples of ways to support families (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Walker et al., 2005).

Schools may develop school liaisons or mediators at the schools to work closely with refugee families (Hamilton, 2004). Current research emphasizes the importance of a mediator between the school and refugee students and their families. Mediators, such as school social workers and mental health specialists, function as individuals "who need to have an in-depth understanding of both the culture of the school and that of the refugee family and child [and]

can act as brokers to develop good communication channels between the child, school, and parents” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 89). These family and school liaisons would work closely with refugee parents to determine their specific needs from the school, advocating on their behalf for additional support. Each newly resettled refugee family would be assigned to a family/school liaison, who would function as an additional layer of support for the families.

School administrators and staff may facilitate family orientations and periodic check-ins with families to ensure their students' academic success and to provide information about school policies and expectations concerning the significance of parental engagement to students' academic achievement and development.

### *6.1 Strengths and limitations*

Conducting this study during a period of war turmoil seems timely and important because it might broadly provide education practitioners with context-specific data on the types of support that Ukrainian refugee parents could be given when engaging with Czech public schools. This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the findings pertain to a limited number of participating parents in this particular context and cannot be generalized beyond the parameters of the study. However, sample size is not a limitation when a researcher conducts qualitative studies and is concerned with exploring phenomena rather than testing them (Bryman, 2012). Secondly, the study sampled Ukrainian parents living in Prague only so it restricts the application of the findings to Ukrainian families living in other parts of the Czech Republic. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of undertaking cross-cultural research. Specifically, the researcher is not from the same cultural background as the participants; this may have accounted for some filtering or withholding of opinions or information.

In spite of the fact that the findings may not fully apply to other regional and contextual settings, the study can and does put forward critical insights about the school-refugee parent partnership in the Czech context.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the armed conflict in Ukraine, people have been displaced across the world. Schools can play a crucial role in the acclimatization of refugee children to their new life in the host country. Czech schools have adopted a myriad of approaches intended to instill in children a sense of security and belonging to the new society. It is currently difficult to assess whether the policies have been successful. The question as to whether it is more effective to form separate classes for refugee children or integrate them

directly into mainstream classes is a subject of ongoing debate. Nevertheless, these efforts deserve appreciation as a series of steps taken to increase access to education.

For immigrant parents, the most common obstacle to engaging in their children's schools is language proficiency (Smith et al., 2008; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009). Understanding the effects of contextual factors and adopting more supportive and welcoming attitudes toward refugee parents could assist the efforts to promote refugee parent involvement.

Although school-age refugees are a minority in the host country's schools, incorporating their cultural elements could contribute to their integration. Teachers should strive to create a culturally sensitive classroom environment in which cultural diversity is valued. A training course could be provided to equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Teacher education programs could stimulate this awareness and help establish good relationships with both refugee students and their parents.

The findings illustrate that there is a need for further research. Future investigations could give voice to teachers dealing with refugees regarding parental involvement across European educational systems. This would allow an exploration into the commonalities and differences and the extent to which current policies and practices pertain to parental involvement.

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