

Professional managing and negotiating refugee education in a context of risk and temporality

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Introduction

This paper discusses reception of Ukrainian children seen from a welfare professional perspective, drawing on an interview with a manager from the municipal administration, supplemented by observations from classrooms and teaching situations, document analysis, and fieldnotes from a round table dialogue with teachers working in reception classes. The research questions we address, though not fully answer yet since the study is still preliminary, are how do professionals negotiate the challenges and dilemmas of receiving refugees from Ukraine in 2022, focusing on experiences of crisis, temporariness and conflicting considerations, and how do they reflect on different forms of organization of reception of Ukrainian children in education, with a focus on discourses on Ukrainian children's (un)readiness regarding for contact with majority Danish children.

The pilot project *Ukrainian children in Danish schools* studies how the reception of the Ukrainian refugee children in Denmark takes place in a unique historical context characterized by general support for Ukrainian refugees and the special legislation on Ukrainian refugees regarding both residence permits and schooling. In the spring of 2022, the Danish government expected up to 100,000 refugees, many of whom would be school-seeking children. It was therefore anticipated that there would be a lack of space in the schools and such a great need for extra teaching staff that the minister of education called on student teachers and retired teachers to make themselves available. This situation differed from the reception of Syrian refugees a few years earlier, which was not met with the same degree of political support. The research interest was to explore the new situation, including the new possibilities of multilingual teaching offered by a special school legislation passed in May 2022.

The 'Agreement (between the government and all parties in the Danish parliament) on increased flexibility in the reception of displaced children and young people from Ukraine in the field of children and education' points to two central aims, which will guide the paper's focus. First, the law must open for practical solutions for the challenge of receiving large numbers of Ukrainian refugees who will need schooling for an unprecedented time:

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Denmark is facing an extraordinarily large influx of displaced people, and a large proportion of these are expected to be children and young people. The specific number and speed of the influx is unknown, but the influx from Ukraine is expected to be so great that it will pose a significant challenge for the country's municipalities, and that it will therefore be necessary to give the municipalities new options for local solutions in the reception of displaced children and young people in day care and primary schools. (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022, p. 1)

Second, the law underlines, which is unusual in a Danish context characterized by demands for integration tending to assimilation (Rytter, 2019), that students should remain attached to Ukrainian language, culture and identity.

At the same time, there is a need to create a framework that gives displaced children and young people from Ukraine the prerequisites they need to succeed, regardless of whether they can soon return to Ukraine, or whether their stay in Denmark may be of longer duration. It is therefore important that the displaced children and young people get a good framework to integrate into Danish society during the time they are here without renouncing their attachment to Ukrainian language, culture and identity. That will, among other things, be ensured by the possibility of creating special offers only for displaced children and young people from Ukraine. At the same time, the intention is that displaced children and young people from Ukraine can transition to the general area as and when the municipality, in cooperation with the individual child, young person and their parents, assesses that the child or young person is ready for this. (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022, p. 2)

Apart from drawing a distinction between 'Danish' and 'Ukrainian' which corresponds to a classic concept of culture, where cultures are tied to national identities, the emphasis on Ukrainian language shows new opportunities for teaching compared to the existing reception system, which focuses only on Danish as a second language. Also, the quote underlines the temporariness of the reception system, in which the children's time depends on both the duration of the war, which is unpredictable, and whether the children will be ready for the general class, which also seems unpredictable.

A postmigrant perspective

In post-migrant societies, migration is a social normality and is not seen as something exceptional. When one begins to de-migrantize migration research, as Foroutan (2019) calls for, other struggles and inequalities are made visible, e.g. related to gender, class and race and the intersections between them. This perspective therefore invites to investigating the complex situation of the reception of Ukrainian refugees, which on the one hand is exceptional, especially for the refugees themselves, while on the other hand is not a new situation in the Danish context, having received larger groups of refugees and immigrants many times before. Inspired by the postmigration perspective, it is relevant to explore whether the professionals organizing the reception of Ukrainian children see this work as a 'normal' task or rather as something exceptional. In other words, this perspective can be used to point out when and how the professionals imply a 'migrantology' (Römhild, 2017) approach seeing the children as 'refugees' or 'bilinguals' before anything else, hence seeing the task of schooling them as exceptional, and when they tend to other perspectives such as child-centred or general pedagogical.

Furthermore, we will discuss professionals' experiences of crisis, temporariness and conflicting considerations related to the organizing of the reception. Research in an earlier project (Jacobsen & Piekut 2022a; Jacobsen & Piekut 2022b) showed that school principals experienced awareness, perplexity and frustration regarding migrant children's insecure and precarious conditions due to the current radicalization of Danish policies on immigration and integration. Data from the current project on Ukrainian children do not point to professionals' worries about the political climate, which may reflect the predominantly positive reception of this group. However, the focus on multilingual teaching allowed by the special law, which was central in our research interest, does not seem at the forefront of the professionals' considerations. Both among management and frontline professionals, the attention seems more directed towards practical issues on organizing and

grouping the students rather than on multilingual teaching and how this could increase equity in education.

Professionals' considerations in relation to the municipalities' chosen organization of reception of Ukrainian children in education

Considerations about the organization of the reception of the Ukrainian children, in the interview with the head of municipal administration, are largely about challenges and dilemmas of two 'models' of reception, which are used in the municipality. Reception classes, where all students are newcomers and can stay for a maximum of two years, and another model, where the children attend general classes in the municipality's primary and lower secondary schools. In relation to the Ukrainian pupils, only the first model is used and in classes with only Ukrainian pupils. In general, the head of administration points to reception classes as an organisation, which produces unreadiness rather than readiness regarding contact with majority Danish children:

If you go and look at (...) a school day and then say how much is teaching, where Danish is spoken, and how much takes place in the breaks - but actually also in the lessons - in all possible other languages. That is the challenge. And it's such a fundamental challenge, because on the one hand, we have that thing where you put children together, who come with different linguistic backgrounds, like one part, and the other part, puts the child out into the general classes and it has to manage him or herself there (...) without knowing the language (...). Little funny story, my colleague here in the school department has children at (name of private school). (...) They have taken in a couple of Ukrainians and by chance, there are a couple of the boys who play with my colleague's boys, and they have been at their home, and he says now: "They can really speak Danish!"

On the other hand, it is also a balancing act with regard to the children who have to be "sluiced out", and when they are ready for it, he argues. He points to how the Ukrainian students at one of the schools have contact with majority Danish children in specific school subjects. "They are involved in sports and things like that", he mentions. A challenge seen from the head of administration's perspective is also that, according to him, there is a wish from the teachers' perspective that newly arrived do not come directly into general classes. A challenge that makes him compare Ukrainian and other newly arrived children with another category: 'Danish children who finds it difficult to sit still'.

The professional organizations sometimes question the fact that we run [the model where children are accepted in general classes]. They'd rather have them in recipient class. And it is obvious that it disturbs. When someone comes in who doesn't know the language. It also disturbs when a Danish child comes in who finds it difficult to sit still.

At the same time, there are also considerations that must be taken if the Ukrainian children are to be distributed in the general area and the already established school classes here (which in the Danish context are followed throughout primary and lower secondary school).

First of all, I have to have the number material. (...) The challenge can be, if there are, for example, (...) what do I know, four in a year group. Then they trigger an extra

track out at a school – they go from two tracks to three tracks. The following year they go home again. (...) Many of them will be a kind of nomads, so understood that way understood in the sense that, if they [the parents] get better pay somewhere else, they move. (...) If they go home tomorrow, it would be a shame for them to have to go out and start somewhere. And it would also be a sad for those schools and classes and so on and so forth. We hire staff and fire again, merge (...) So that's what we're messing with right now.

Another example of professionals' considerations in relation to the municipalities' organization of reception of Ukrainian children in school comes from a round-table dialogue with a group of teachers who were all working in reception classes at schools in different municipalities in Denmark. Some worked in classes with only Ukrainian students and some in classes with both students from Ukraine and from other countries. In this dialogue, other challenges and dilemmas are emphasized and discussed.

Here, teachers say that the Ukrainian children and young people think it is "more fun" to go to school in Denmark than in the Ukrainian school, but also that they seem to find it difficult to manage themselves in the freer environment. According to the teachers here is therefore a need in the reception class for a clear structure and class management. Several of the teachers point out that the Ukrainian children and parents are also worried about whether the children learn enough in the reception class. In the teachers' understanding this has to do with differences between the school in Denmark and Ukraine where the latter involves far more rote learning, homework, tests and grades.

On the other hand, a teacher also makes the point during the dialogue that we cannot treat Ukrainian children as one group. A child from Ukraine may have more in common with a child from the South of France than with another child from Ukraine, argues a teacher. The teacher points to mixed reception classes to avoid seeing the Ukrainian children as the same. For example, in relation to the need for structure, which there was otherwise a common understanding of was a form of unreadiness among the Ukrainian children regarding becoming students in general, Danish classes. This understanding is also reflected in fieldwork in Ukrainian reception classes and from conversations with the teachers there.

Concluding remarks

Returning to the postmigrant perspective, it becomes obvious that a 'migrantology' perspective (Römhild, 2019) is still prevalent. The Ukrainian children are often seen as refugees or migrants first and foremost. The focus on their possible returning to Ukraine seems to lead to more dilemmas in professionals' approaches than if they were expected to stay for a longer time. The reception situation is seen as exceptional, which may create barriers for creating quality education, including taking advantage of the new possibilities for multilingual teaching allowed by the special law.

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Short paper: Ukrainian children and the Danish society

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Introduction

Schools are an important context for acculturation processes into a new society for children and families who go through transnational migration. In addition, '[e]ducation is perhaps the most obvious of the state's instruments for pursuing its nationalist visions through children and childhood (Spyrou 2011: 533). In this paper, we are concerned with a research topic, which has gained less attention in previous research: In what ways do reception classes function as a vehicle for inculturation into national and nationalistic frameworks for thinking and action?

Specifically, we are concerned with what Zsuzsa Millei has coined the 'pedagogy of nation' (2019). Millei defines pedagogy of nation as a kind of everyday nationalism, characterized by 'continuity of the everyday re/production of national frameworks through countless situated activities' (Millei 2019: 84). Pedagogy of nation covers both 'intentional educational practices, such as teaching the curricula or hidden curriculum by a teacher' and 'less explicit and non-intentional but still educative encounters, incitement of a will to learn in children, and non-human teachers (such as the environment), spaces and emotions are also included.' (Millei 2019: 85).

Using as a case the reception of a group of Ukrainian children and youth and their families in a Danish reception institution at a Danish school, we offer preliminary findings from the part of the project that deals with 'culture' in the everyday life in the reception class. In this paper we address the following questions:

1. What intentional and non-intentional pedagogies of nation activities are present in the everyday practices in the reception class, involving children and youth, and human and non-human teachers?
2. What national frameworks are produced in the pedagogy of nation activities in the everyday life in the reception institution?
3. What potentials for belonging do the pedagogy of nation of the reception institution offer to children and youth?

Methodology

The paper presents findings from four months of ethnographic inspired educational field research in a Danish school, including data from participant observation of teaching activities (in classroom teaching, gym classes

etc.), break time (in classrooms and at the playground), and school-parent cooperation activities (for instance at parent meetings).

When approaching our data, we employ an analytical strategy informed by 'key incidents' methodological theory (Sindberg Jensen & Hobel, 2020). The advantage of this strategy lies therein key incidents function as suitable starting point for understanding the conditions migrant children and adolescents face, in e.g, the Danish school system, because key incidents shed light on 'the universal in the concrete, the relationship between part and whole' (Ericson 1977, 61). Hereby, key incidents are examples that points to an understanding of the structures and dynamics that characterize the larger school context but also the broader context of society (Sindberg Jensen & Hobel, 2020) in relation to the fieldwork that form the basis of, in this case, our project 'Ukrainian Children in Danish Schools'.

Findings

In the following we present three key incidents, which are analyzed in the pedagogy of nation perspective. The three incidents cover a variety of contexts, where pedagogy of nation practices occur in the reception institution, from the parent-teacher meeting, which is the context for the first incident, to the second incident's teaching practices surrounding Christmas celebrations at the school, to, finally, the third incident, which occurs in a more formal teaching setting.

Key incident 1: "Danish School Culture" as presented at a parent-teacher meeting

It is late October and the first parent-teacher meeting for the Ukrainian parents at our field school is scheduled. It is a joint meeting for parents of students in the reception institution. "School culture" is on the agenda for the meeting and is presented by the teachers with the following underlying subtopics; 1) *food culture*, 2) *IT and AULA*, 3) *physical education*, and 4) *teaching in general and more specifically*.

2) Food culture.

A teacher highlights some food policies; a) the children should bring two lunch boxes, b) it is not allowed to bring candy or soda, c) they are not allowed to share food. Dorte explains this by letting the parents know that it can become conflictual in class. The parents laugh. Dorte continues and says that d) the children of course are allowed to bring candy and cake to share in class when it is their birthday.

3) Physical education (PE).

Kasper, a PE-teacher, starts by stating that "the students have to remember to bring sports clothes and indoor shoes". Afterwards he is talking about showering after PE. A mother says that 'the students are not used to being naked together after PE. They are not comfortable doing that'. A female PE-teacher says that she has

an agreement with the girls about wearing swimwear in the showers. Kasper says that it is not a problem, since “the boys are good at it”. A mother instantly says that the boys have a different version of this and asks whether the boys are also allowed to wear some clothes in the showers. Now all teachers are getting involved in the conversation. They state, that ‘it is Danish culture to shower after PE’ and that ‘we are just freer in Denmark regarding nudity’. The parents strongly express that they want all the children to be allowed to wear underpants or swimwear in the showers. The teachers agree after a while of discussion between themselves.

As it is shown in this key incident, there are clear expectations from the teachers about the student’s (and parents’) behavior when it comes to different aspects of the Danish school system. Firstly, the fact that these topics are a part of the first parent-teacher meeting illustrates the importance of them. Secondly, the teachers have a specific perception of what is considered “healthy” or “correct procedures” – and what is certainly not – and tends to connect these perceptions to “Danish culture” and “Danish-ness”.

According to the teachers the proper behavior then becomes a matter of eating healthy with the exceptions of special occasions, which e.g., birthdays are considered as. Danish students are positioned as free-spirited and comfortable with nudity. Nudity is pointed out as essential to become free-minded individuals with a relaxed mindset about the body and body ideals. The categories that the teachers use emphasize their way of doing pedagogy of nation (Millei 2019).

Key incident 2: Ukrainian Children in a Danish Christmas Setting

At the field school with the youngest kids. December starts in a few days. Around 10:30 the teacher, Dorte, hands out gingerbread cookies, to all students. Dorte and a Danish co-teacher talk about how one of the students is doing good in school today– assumably because his dad came to Denmark. According to the teachers it is always the dads in Ukrainian families who are in charge of educating their children. They are positive that the student has been told by his dad to do better in school.

Dorte has asked the principal permission to buy eleven small Christmas gifts, so they can make a Christmas calendar in class where each student will receive a present at some point during December. She explains how Danish kids at the school usually bring presents themselves, but she felt compelled to ask for acceptance by the principal to pay for the presents. She explains the need to do so by saying that the Ukrainian families are poor and wouldn’t have money for the gifts. She does not want the students in the class to feel left out of, in her opinion, Danish Christmas tradition.

Soon there is Christmas Party at the school. Dorte has invited the Ukrainian parents, but the day is still un-planned. Dorte suggests watching a Ukrainian Christmas movie, but according to the Ukrainian co-

teacher in the class, Russia has banned all movies in Ukrainian. Instead, Dorte focuses on Danish traditional Christmas food. She is especially worried the Ukrainians will not like pickled herring.

Based on the concept 'Pedagogy of Nation' (Millei, 2018) the key incident described above focus attention on, at least, three interesting situations that emphasize different ideas and practices of nationalism in the institutional lives of Ukrainian children in Danish schools. *First*, celebrating Christmas as a 'Danish thing' handing out ginger cookies and the (assumed) introduction to pickled herring. Also, the comment about Russia 'ruining' the Christmas Party due to banned movies. *Second*, assumptions of mother and father roles in Ukrainian upbringing by Danish school professionals by describing the reason of a student's behavior as a result of the father's arrival to Denmark. And *third*, the situation about buying Christmas presents as a nice gesture though emerged by an idea of the Ukrainian families in Denmark being socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Key incident 3: 'What did we believe in before we became Christians?'

In one of the lessons we observed the theme is the Viking Age. The teacher and the youth work on the theme from a textbook with questions and the teacher google for pictures and facts. At some point the teacher asks the students what the Vikings do when they are at home. 'They're living peacefully', a girl answers. It appears to be a point she gained from the textbook. The teacher answers with enthusiasm: 'Yes, that is correct. The ones staying at home are peaceful.' In the same sequence, the teacher asks about the role of women and as he does not receive a clear answer, he answers the question by stressing that the women were at home taking care of the house, but that they had 'more power than in other places'. Lastly, the teacher asks 'what did we believe in before we became Christians?' and he arrives at the answer that 'we' believed in Odin and Thor, adding that it was 'a violent time', which called for 'a war religion'.

It is interesting how, through the teacher's questions and answers, a discourse about Denmark is being established, where the foundation of the 'modern' Denmark is rooted in the society that is under transformation in the Viking Age. From violence to peace and, from Pagan religion to Christianity, while it is stressed that good deeds, such as peaceful behavior and relative gender equality was already prevailing in Denmark in premodern times. Moreover, in this discursive formation the premodern Denmark is closely connected to the Denmark of current days, a point which is signified by the teacher's use of "we" regarding religion.

The incident is an example of pedagogy of nation (Millei 2019) involving an intentional teaching practice, which by a combination of a textbook and the teacher lead class dialogue, evokes a distinct and essentializing discourse about a ceaseless progressing and progressive Denmark.

Discussion

The analysis of three key incidents derived from the field research have shed light on a variety of activities of a pedagogy of nation nature. The national framework which can be crystalized from the instances is a homogenized image of Denmark as a country with a long history, which is marked by being peaceful, Christian, marked by gender equality, having a distinct body and food culture, and a distinct religious tradition that, in the perspective of the school, are important sites of identification, in order to be culturalized into the Danish society.

What the children and youth meet are very dichotomous understandings of what Denmark is and what it implies to be Danish and, in return, what Ukraine is and, implicitly, what it means to be Ukrainian. As such, in school practices saturated by nationalistic discourses and framework, the social locations (Yuval-Davis 2006) available to the children and youth are in risk of being restricted to essentialized categories of being either 'Danish' or 'Ukrainian' on the expense of other identity categories such as age, class, gender and knowledge and experiences from life worlds of children and youth.

Based on the initial findings, one of the questions which would be interesting to explore further is the tension field between the school being both a site of identification and belonging for the children and youth (Yuval-Davis 2006) and a vehicle for acculturation into the Danish nation state through pedagogies of nation of the school.

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Digital technologies in the practices of Ukrainian child refugees in Denmark

Digital media technologies affect our perceptions of distance as an expression of time and space. Therefore, when media practices factor into being in a country at war and fleeing from it, its population is presented with a host of digital (and non-digital) connections between frontlines and newly established diasporas. What is happening in the neighbouring town? Where should we go and how do we get there? In crisis situations, questions like these are often answered using digital technologies and access to the internet. The research project presented in this paper focuses on Ukrainian children that are refugees of war and have fled to Denmark. Some with their immediate family, and some with others who have brought them along. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these children were already living media-saturated lives in the sense that a lot of them were using smartphones, tablets, and laptops with internet connection. Now, they are using this wide repertoire of digital technologies, applications, and platforms to make sense of and mitigate their life in refuge.

Methods

The very preliminary findings presented here are based on ethnographic fieldwork (Christensen & James, 2017; Emerson et al., 2011; Pink, 2013) and semi-structured interviews (Prior, 2016) with child refugees from Ukraine (ages 5 to 15 years) and their parents/caretakers, educators in Danish reception classes, semi-professional translators and teacher assistants, and school leaders. This early analysis focuses on how digital technologies and media enter the configuration of the actors – emphasising on the children – and structure their practices of presence across complex contexts. At its current stage, this part of the research project builds on data gathered in the school setting as well

as at an open ‘dialogue conference’ facilitated by the research team at University of Southern Denmark on February 28th, 2023.

Practicing belonging

Our collective fieldwork has revealed a tension between going to school in Danish reception classes – thus making efforts to become part of the local society – and trying to stay connected to the realm of education in Ukraine at the same time. The global phenomenon (with notable exceptions) of school closures during the 2020-22 era of the Covid-19 pandemic created experiences that are now fairly easy to draw on, provided there are teachers, internet connection and computer equipment available to the students. Consequently, the observed group of children were, in nuanced ways, remaining in touch with their Ukrainian programmes of education. For instance, asynchronous remote learning was taking place through video-recorded instructions and digital work sheets, but synchronous and rather intensive cram schools where students work their way through half a year’s curriculum in a couple of weeks, have also been mentioned to us by parents/caregivers of the children. The following passage from our field notes is offered to get a sense of the digital media repertoire navigated by the observed children:

Field notes from Bakkeskolen, November 22nd 2022, 9.45-10.00

I’m talking to Khrystyna in English. She was watching TikTok videos on her iPad, but I didn’t quite see what it was before she exited the app. I’m trying to ask if and how she’s been keeping in touch with folks back home using her iPad or phone. She’s using Telegram to stay in touch, she explains. I ask if she’s also attending Ukrainian school remotely. She appears to understand my question in a more general sense and starts to explain how children in Ukraine live under different circumstances which affect their options for school in equally different ways. She uses her iPad to

show me pictures of Kherson, where the situation is bad right now. She also uses Google Translate to explain her points to me more precisely by translating key phrases and words. Eventually, she understands my initial question about her own practices and shows me some educational material from Ukraine, which she tends to when she has time. She focuses on math especially, she says.

The short example with Khrystyna (age 14) takes us through a range of practices with digital media technologies. Additionally, the informal interview itself takes place through and in connection to media practices as well, as Khrystyna searches for recent photos of Kherson using Google's image search and makes use of Google Translate to get her points across to a researcher who does not speak Ukrainian or Russian. The practice of using Google Translate is common in the reception class where Khrystyna studies with 10 other child refugees from Ukraine between the ages of 12 and 15 years. The teachers turn to it when key information has to be conveyed more precisely, and in the reception class with the youngest children (ages 5 to 9 years), the children are allowed to use direct translation of Danish text in their browser-based math training software *MathFessor*.

Generally, Danish schools are permeated with digital technologies (Olofsson et al., 2021), and Google's education platforms are very common in combination with the use of Google Chromebooks. Moreover, the aforementioned experiences from the Covid era also led to new practices in Danish schools and society at large (c.f. Lundtofte, 2021; Johansen & Lundtofte, 2023), furthering the familiarisation with Google's education suites in particular.

Discussion and perspectives

Moving forward, we aim to make visits at home with some of the children that we have, until now, only been observing at school and in connection to the mentioned dialogue conference at University of Southern Denmark. Our current data indicate that the children are commonly using apps such as

Telegram and TikTok to stay informed about the situation in Ukraine in general as well as how their friends and family who have remained in the country are doing. Drawing on theories of platformisation (van Dijck, Poell & de Wall, 2018), we can nuance the implications of these practices through a critical lens, as TikTok and Telegram are commercial products created to monetize through processes of datafication (c.f. Flensburg & Lomborg, 2021; Mascheroni, 2020). Even so, being in refuge creates certain needs of access to new information, which is conveniently structured by these commercial platforms. In conclusion, the empirical data we gather and our future analyses in this research project should remain sensitive to how and why the children make sense of their lives in connection to media practices, whilst remaining critical of the commercially motivated mechanisms that ultimately affect the children's agency. In connection to this, the children's predicament of being in a process of integration into Danish society whilst trying to remain connected to Ukraine is also enacted through media practices. Therefore, we must further our understanding of how these practices function in relation to social inclusion and exclusion.

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