Educational Hospitality at the Intersection of Forced Migration and Disability: Listening to the Voices of Ukrainian Refugee Children with Disabilities living in Germany

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Abstract

CONTEXT: As the global population of forcibly displaced individuals surpasses 110 million, nearly 40% are children, with many living with disabilities. The intersection of forced migration and disability often results in compounded experiences of exclusion and marginalization, particularly in educational settings. This issue has also been pronounced for Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities, whose unique needs are often overlooked. Existing literature has largely focused on either refugees or individuals with disabilities, neglecting the overlapping challenges faced by those who belong to both groups. This article addresses the gap by investigating the educational experiences of Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities in Germany, exploring how these children navigate education in the context of forced migration and disability.

APPROACH: The study is part of a broader mixed-methods research project that explores the educational trajectories and aspirations of Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities and their families. Five qualitative interviews were conducted with Ukrainian children aged 10 to 13, who are attending both mainstream and special schools in Germany. Using an inductive coding approach, the study analysed the children's experiences and aspirations, with attention to their past and present educational contexts, as well as their dreams for the future.

FINDINGS: Two key themes emerged: 'seeking recognition' and 'epistemic ignorance.' The theme of 'seeking recognition' reflects the children's desire to be seen and understood in their uniqueness, often confronting educational systems that fail to recognize their distinct needs and capabilities. Children reported feelings of injustice and exclusion when their achievements and identities were disregarded, particularly in relation to educational placement and discipline. 'Epistemic ignorance' highlights how educational institutions often overlook the knowledge and epistemic contributions refugee children with disabilities bring with them, focusing instead on perceived deficits. The children expressed frustration due to assumptions about their abilities, which resulted in a sense of disconnection and failure.

CONCLUSION: The study calls for an ethical and inclusive response to the educational needs of refugee children with disabilities, drawing on Levinas' concept of the infinite responsibility for the Other. Addressing the intersectional challenges these children face requires educational systems to recognize their unique knowledge and experiences, offering what is termed 'educational hospitality.' This approach fosters inclusivity by respecting the distinct epistemes of refugee children with disabilities and ensuring they are truly seen and valued within their host educational systems.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Disability, Right To Inclusive Education, Right To Be Heard, Intersectionality

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Points of Interest

- Focus on overlooked children: My research highlights the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities, a group often left out of discussions about education and support services.
- Challenges in education: These children face multiple barriers, such as not being fully recognized by teachers or being placed in educational programs that do not meet their abilities and needs.
- Voice of the children: By listening directly to these children's personal stories, I aim to show how they feel ignored or misunderstood, especially when their skills or backgrounds are not acknowledged in their new schools.
- Improving inclusion: The study calls for schools and educators to recognize the unique knowledge and experiences these children bring with them and suggests that by doing so, we can make education more welcoming and inclusive for all students.
- Ethical responsibility: The work emphasizes the moral obligation we have to support these children, ensuring they are seen, heard, and given equal opportunities to succeed.

Introduction

The global population of forcibly displaced persons surged to unprecedented levels in 2024, with over 120 million refugees currently documented worldwide. Nearly 40% of those forcibly displaced are children (UNHCR, 2024). The armed conflict in Ukraine has fueled these numbers since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 with more than 6 million Ukrainians forced to flee the country and further 3.7 million persons internally displaced (UNHCR, 2024). More than 1.1 million of those fleeing Ukraine arrived in Germany, with more than 350,000 Ukrainian refugee children currently residing there (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Concurrently, the population of persons with disabilities is growing too. Approximately 1.3 billion individuals worldwide live with a disability, constituting 16% of the global population. The global prevalence, however, increases with age. Among children under 14 years of age, 5.8% live with a disability (WHO, 2022). Despite the diverse and heterogeneous nature of both populations of refugees and persons with disabilities, they often share common experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and inequality, extensively documented thus far.

The aforementioned heterogeneity within refugee communities and persons with disabilities also gives rise to a subset of individuals who concurrently identify with both groups. This specific population is, however, far less visible. Indeed, the prevalence of disabilities among refugees remains unknown (Crock et al., 2017), including the subgroup of refugee children with disabilities. Some reports even suggest that the incidence might surpass that of the general population (HelpAge Internation & Handicap International, 2014), although reliable statistical data remains lacking. Furthermore, the lived experiences of refugees with disabilities, who face diverse practices of intersectional discrimination and multidimensional exclusion not only when accessing their right to (inclusive) education, remain equally invisible.

In the framework of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy (Levinas, 1986), the 'Other' - in this context, a displaced child with disabilities - stands at the school gate, often unnoticed and invisible. Levinas argues that the face of the Other calls us to respond with an infinite and asymmetrical responsibility, an ethical imperative not to abandon the Other (Casper, 2020). This responsibility does not arise from a conscious decision or rational consideration. It is an immediate response to the presence of the Other, to the face of the Other.

Drawing on Slee's argument that inclusive education should engage with goals and aspirations beyond technical considerations (Slee, 2011), and Veck's view that the ethical imperative to include the Other "originates in a perfectionist moment or responsibility that precedes all readily available answers to moral difficulties" (Veck, 2014, p. 462) and involves listening to the voice of the Other in a silence that allows for attention (Veck, 2009), this article aims to listen to the voices of Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities. By doing so, it seeks to learn from the Other and address the betrayal of inclusion (Veck, 2014).

Forcibly displaced children with disabilities as the Other

Marginalized groups are often perceived as homogeneous populations defined by shared characteristics. However, many individuals embody multiple intersecting identities, such as women with disabilities, refugee children, or displaced families at risk, who face various forms of disadvantage across interconnected domains. This complex interplay of vulnerabilities gives rise to intersectional discrimination, a concept first articulated by Crenshaw to explain the interaction between race and gender dynamics (Crenshaw, 1998). Intersectionality highlights the considerable diversity within each group and introduces a new dimension of discrimination, wherein intersecting factors create specific forms of disadvantage that cannot simply be understood as the sum of individual discriminatory practices. As a result, these compounded disadvantages often exceed the cumulative impact of each individual factor (De Beco, 2020).

For instance, being a refugee child with disabilities may subject me to multiple, overlapping forms of exclusion. These might result in me being left behind, limit my chances of surviving the journey, and restrict my access to humanitarian aid and mainstream assistance programs, including my right to education. My family's journey may take longer, increasing our vulnerability to attacks and insecurity (Reilly, 2010). The financial burden of irregular migration may escalate, potentially leading to family separation (Dubow & Kuschminder, 2022), while my parents may encounter unprecedented challenges and shifts in their roles as caregivers (McNatt & Boothby, 2018), all of which may negatively impact our mental and physical health (Fegert et al., 2018).

Educational experiences at the intersection of forced migration and disability

Refugee children with disabilities face a wide range of challenges when accessing education, which can ultimately result in the denial of their right to education (author). Physical inaccessibility stands out as a major obstacle for refugee students with disabilities, further exacerbated by inadequate teacher training (Handicap International, 2015; Muhaidat et al., 2020; Steigmann, 2020), the absence of essential assistive devices (Smith-Khan & Crock, 2018) and the lack of individualized support (Odeh et al., 2021; Werner et al., 2021), as well as limited awareness of available resources (Bešić & Hochgatterer, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2024). Stigma and the fear of rejection may lead some refugee families with children with disabilities to conceal their child's condition, resulting in undiscovered or underreported educational needs (UNESCO, 2019). Furthermore, some refugee families may not prioritize education for their children with disabilities (HelpAge Internation & Handicap International, 2014), especially for their daughters with disabilities (Odeh et al., 2021; Oner et al., 2020), even though education is generally seen as crucial for social mobility by refugee parents of children without disabilities (Amina et al., 2023). Children with disabilities fleeing Ukraine specifically face long waiting lists for assessment and registration for special needs education in the European host countries, disrupted therapy opportunities after leaving Ukraine (Mulheir et al., 2023), lack of school places both in the mainstream and special school systems, problems with recognizing the disability status and general lack of information regarding the educational opportunities (author, forthcoming). However, research also indicates that Ukrainian refugee parents hold high educational aspirations for their children with disabilities and engage extensively in their children's education (author, forthcoming).

Listening to the voice of the Other

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that the relationship to the Other is the first philosophy and this ethical responsibility precedes any other form of knowledge (Levinas, 2011). By encountering the face of the Other we are called upon to respond and to include in order to diminish the betrayal of the Other (Veck, 2014). Furthermore, according to Levinas, my responsibility for the Other is infinite, can never be fulfilled, and is not reciprocal, thus constituting an asymmetrical obligation based purely on the existence of the Other (Levinas, 1986). Responding to the face of forcibly displaced children with

disabilities is therefore an ethical imperative. At the same time, it is also a binding human right, as articulated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which stipulates the right of the child to be heard in all matters affecting them. Over the past three decades, this right has evolved into a robust legal norm, both at the international level and within the domestic legal frameworks of many countries worldwide (Parkes, 2013). Moreover, Article 12, in conjunction with Articles 13 and 15 of the CRC, serves as a foundation for advancing the concept of child participation (Doek, 2019).

Although Article 12 does not explicitly regulate its influence on the right to education, when read in conjunction with the two education-related articles (Art. 28-29), guiding principles relevant to the area of education emerge. These include child-centered learning, involvement of children in educational decisions, democratic school structures, children's involvement in development of education legislation and policies - principles that also inform the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Hammarberg, 1998; Parkes, 2013).

Children's voices, in particular, are recognized as essential for promoting inclusive education and challenging segregation (Messiou et al., 2024, 2022; Shaw et al., 2021; Hajisoteriou et al., 2021). Several scholars have highlighted the interrelation of student voices and the development of successful inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020; Messiou, 2019). Veck articulates the link between listening and inclusion by stressing the necessity to listen wisely to children, which means hearing "in their words, neither a confirmation of, nor a challenge to, the label attached to them, but rather a uniqueness that is entirely their own" ((Veck, 2009) p. 147). This article seeks to capture the uniqueness of the voices of five Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities, thereby offering a partial response to the face of the Other. Central to this research are their perspectives on past and present educational experiences, as well as their aspirations in terms of interpretations of future possibilities (Boccagni, 2017).

Methodology

This article presents findings from a section of a broader mixed-methods study investigating the educational experiences and aspirations of Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities and their families in Germany (for more details on the quantitative research including parental survey, see author (forthcoming)). As part of the study, qualitative interviews with five forcibly displaced children with disabilities were conducted (Table 1):

Table 1.
Research participants

Child	Age	School in Germany	Disability
1	10 years	Mainstream school, 5th grade	Chronic disease
2	12 years	Special school, 6th grade	Learning disability
3	13 years	Special boarding school, 5th grade (downgraded from 6th grade)	Visual disability
4	11 years	Mainstream school, 5th grade	Autism spectrum disorder
5	12 years	Special school, 5th grade	Down syndrome

The participants were recruited through diverse NGOs supporting refugees and/or families with children with disabilities in Germany. Initially, ten parents expressed interest in having their child participate in the interviews. However, due to multiple practical constraints, only five interviews were ultimately conducted. The semi-structured interviews were carried out without interpreters in either Russian or Ukrainian by bilingual research assistants with one exception (Child 1), where the interview was conducted in English at the child's request, with the principal investigator leading the interview. Avoiding the use of interpreters during data collection was a deliberate measure aimed at enhancing the quality of interaction between the children and the researchers. However, the data was subsequently translated into German and English and analyzed by the principal investigator, whose knowledge of and

lived experience within the Ukrainian context are limited. These linguistic and cultural differences represent notable limitations of the present research project.

The main focus of the interviews was on the children's educational experiences in Ukraine and Germany, as well as their aspirations for the future including e.g. questions on favourite and least favourite aspects of schooling in Ukraine and Germany as well as career aspirations. The length of the interviews varied, influenced by factors such as the child's temperament, their familiarity with the interview process, and their specific needs. All interviews were translated into English and analyzed using an inductive approach to coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Results and discussion

Through the open coding process, two major categories emerged: 'seeking recognition' at the level of the individual children and 'epistemic ignorance' at the level of educational institutions. These will be discussed below.

Seeking recognition

By calling to me, according to Levinas, the Other is seeking me, looking for my recognition. However, by recognizing the Other, unavoidable appropriation or assimilation of the Other into one's own subjectivity follows. Levinas believes that the denying of such difference is a fundamental ethical failure as it disrespects the other in their absolute exteriority, their absolute difference to us (Yar, 2001). In this context, this article seeks to offer participants an attentive look that recognizes their uniqueness, as opposed to the judgmental disciplinary gaze (Veck, 2009).

All the children interviewed expressed, either directly or indirectly, their desire to be seen and recognized. This emerged through descriptions of moments when recognition – an attentive gaze - was lacking, or through the articulation of dreams, which they hoped would bring them recognition. Situations where the lack of recognition was visible included experiences of injustice, profound misunderstanding or being misplaced within the education system. The interviewed children recalled instances, in which their sense of justice or discipline had not been acknowledged:

"I don't like that teachers are not allowed to search other students' backpacks. Someone stole two euros from me. Although it's not the 2 euros that make me sad, but the lack of justice because the teachers are not allowed to search the children's backpacks." (Child 4)

"You know, my classmates sometimes yelled. Typically, well, if… I also, but I, it's like, didn't speak to them in a way. Said that they should shut their mouths and so on, like a teacher. And they didn't like it when I said that. And they said I shouldn't say that." (Child 3)

Some children experienced a lack of recognition by being placed on a non-academic track within the German education system:

"You know, my school is an Oberschule [non-academic path in the secondary education in Germany]. I would change that. To Gymnasium [academic path]." (Child 1)

Another child shared how he was always facing difficulties and felt compelled to study and learn constantly in order to be recognized:

"I study. That's the most important thing because you can't live without studying, because I always have to learn because, as always, I will have problems." (Child 2)

These experiences could also be interpreted through Sarter's concept of the human struggle for recognition (Sartre, 1992). According to Sarter, it is not simply the lack of recognition that causes suffering, but rather being held captive within specific patterns of socially mandated recognition (Bedorf, 2021). In the context of the children interviewed, success in academics or discipline could represent such patterns, which may vary across cultures and regions, carrying different interpretations, significance, and consequences. By not being seen in their uniqueness, the interviewed children felt excluded. Strategies for seeking recognition that may have worked in their home countries seemed to have the opposite effect in the host country, leading to feelings of injustice, disrespect, and disappointment. This may be particularly distressing for children with autism spectrum disorder. One child even expressed a sense of resignation from the pursuit of recognition:

"I would want many things, but they're not achievable in this life. So, there's no need to talk about it. […] It's just of galactic scale, and it's not possible in our world. (Child 4)

In contrast, other children expressed their desire for recognition through their dreams and aspirations. These dreams often revolved around professional success:

"And when I grow up, I really want, I dream of becoming a DJ. […] I'll buy myself cool equipment, lights, something special. And I'll hire a driver, hire my assistant who will help me with this. And I'll develop my hobby because I really like this hobby." (Child 3)

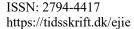*"I want to swim. Professionally. […] and play tennis. Both. I will do that." (Child 5)*

Another child expressed explicitly his dream of combining the professional success with being recognized as 'important' by everyone, implicitly reflecting on the current experiences of possible marginalization and invisibility:

"[I would like to become a] teacher, the most important one, the […] Yes. And I will be the only teacher in the classroom, the most important one, the strictest one. And when someone is mean, I`ll give him a six. […] Yes, I will be in all possible classes and I will teach all those children. […] I will teach everything." (Child 2)

Epistemic ignorance

The second category, closely interrelated with the first, is epistemic ignorance (Kuokkanen, 2007; Spivak, 1990) observed at the level of the educational institutions. Foucault describes epistemes as "something like a world-view'' and ''the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems" (Foucault, 2010, p. 191). Building in this, Kuokkanen conceptualizes what she calls 'epistemic ignorance' as ways "in which academic theories and practices ignore, marginalize and exclude other than dominant Western European epistemic and intellectual traditions" (Kuokkanen, 2008, p. 63). It is broadly acknowledged that tensions arising from differing cultural values, expectations, and aspirations between indigenous and mainstream societal groups are among the primary causes of discomfort for indigenous students in academic settings (Kuokkanen, 2008).
Applying this concept to non-tertiary education and to contexts involving forced migration, we can identify parallels between the experiences of indigenous students in higher education and those of refugee children with disabilities in host educational systems. The same unease described by indigenous scholars was echoed in the narratives of the children interviewed in this study. They described situations where their educational backgrounds, knowledge, and broader epistemes were either actively or passively ignored, as teaching staff often focused on the knowledge gaps these children were perceived to have, while disregarding the (often unexpected) epistemes they brought with them:

"I hate my English teacher. […] Well, my grades are bad. […] I was very sad, very unhappy. […] I loved English, I always loved talking in English, I enjoy it now as well with you. But at the same time, I really don't like it now because of the teacher. She thinks maybe I am not good. […] No, I don't think it [that I have a B1 English certificate] interests her. She has her textbook and I don't think she cares that I know other things that are not in the textbook." (Child 1)

The practical consequences of epistemic ignorance included experiences of being 'downgraded' in order to address perceived knowledge deficits:

"...and I transferred to the fifth [grade] because...Yes, because I had some problems. […] I lagged behind a bit. That means I didn't know everything, so they sent me to the fifth grade to catch up." (Child 3)

Other consequences were evident in decisions about school placement, particularly in determining whether a child should follow an academic or non-academic track within the secondary education system:

"I need to go to this school [non-academic path of secondary education] because I need to learn German. […] Someone thought maybe that Gymnasium [academic path] is too difficult, or I don't know. I don't think it would be too difficult. […] and I don't know why they think it is easier to learn German at an Oberschule. It does not make much sense to me." (Child 1)

For one child with autism spectrum disorder, the experience of epistemic ignorance resulted in a deep sense of disorientation, as the educational system failed to recognize and integrate the unique epistemes he brought with him. This led to a profound disillusionment:

"I stopped liking mathematics after the German school broke the logic of this world for me. I used to really like mathematics. Exactly! And when I found out what two squared means [here], I started to hate the subject." (Child 4)

Educational hospitality

As already suggested, the two categories of 'seeking recognition' and 'epistemic ignorance' are intricately connected. Experiences of epistemic ignorance may hinder child's efforts to seek recognition, may even lead to the feelings of being utterly failed by the school system. To address these challenges, we turn once again to the work of Emmanuel Levinas and indigenous scholars for guidance. Kuokkanen suggests referring to indigenous epistemes that the problem of knowing the Other needs to be redefined: "not in terms of knowing the 'other' but in terms of learning to 'see' the existence of epistemes that have long been rendered invisible" (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 120). In this framework, she argues that countering epistemic ignorance requires the recognition of non-mainstream epistemes as a gift, calling for an engagement with the philosophy of reciprocity and the logic of the gift (Kuokkanen, 2008) as counterparts to the Western liberal norms of the individualist subject, who fears being dependent on others (Kuokkanen, 2007).

The first step in overcoming epistemic ignorance is to see and recognize the unique epistemes refugee children with disabilities bring to their host education systems. This process presupposes a genuine encounter with the face of the Other, as Levinas urges. We must not only direct an attentive gaze toward all of our students but also toward ourselves. As Veck observes, this self-reflection guarantees that we avoid "lying to others by ensuring that we do not lie to ourselves. The most appalling of lies are told with the utter conviction that what is being said is true and good, for they are spoken by liars with absolutely no understanding of who they might be nor of what they have allowed themselves to become" (Veck, 2009, p. 151). Engaging in this kind of reflective practice demands courage and a deliberate

effort to resist the laziness of thought that leads to the passive acceptance of pre-established knowledge systems and uniform discourses (Veck, 2009).

Once the epistemes of refugee children with disabilities are recognized, they also need to be received appropriately even if it may not be possible for us to fully comprehend the logic of the gift. Learning to receive the gift of the epistemes of the Other und thus offering recognition without totalizing attempts to contain the Other might indeed foster educational hospitality, which is rooted in our responsibility for the Other. This hospitality does not, however, operate within the binary give-and-take logic of the exchange paradigm, but instead follows the indigenous concept of the logic of the gift, where "gifts are not given first and foremost to ensure a countergift later on, but to actively acknowledge the relationships and coexistence with the world without which survival would not be possible" (Kuokkanen, 2008, p. 66). This non-reciprocity resonates with Levinas' idea of asymmetrical responsibility for the Other who goes so far as to claim I am a hostage to the Other (Lévinas, 1998), though this relationship is nonviolent and, paradoxically, forms the foundation of my freedom. "The ethical relation constitutes me as a free hostage, and the Other to whom I am a hostage also liberates me by calling me to a responsibility that I can choose to accept or to rebel against" (Horton, 2018, p. 198).

If accepted, the commitment to responsibility toward the Other gives rise to unconditional welcome, in this case of non-dominant epistemes and epistemologies. This requires, however, both knowledge and action. Merely establishing inclusive curricula is insufficient, as unconditional welcome transcends educational policies, programs, or guidelines, which, as Dryden-Peterson (2022) observes, are rarely the decisive factors enabling refugees to achieve their educational aspirations. Instead, a sustained and ongoing engagement is essential (Kuokkanen, 2007), beginning even before direct encounters with the Other, i.e. at the level of teacher education. It is imperative that future teachers engage with diverse epistemes, beyond the dominant ones, during their pre-service training in a hospitable academic environment. Such formation enables them to extend this experienced hospitality to all students they encounter throughout their teaching careers in varied educational settings. These efforts, which are equally relevant to continuous professional development, hold the potential to address, at least partially, the tensions inherent in dominant models of education, which often deprive refugee students with and without disabilities "the resources and recognition, the skills and the knowledge, for each child to create a future where they have equal opportunities and life chances" (Dryden-Peterson, 2022, p. 132).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Sources of funding