

# A Sense of Belonging

## Perspectives on the integration and inclusion of Ukrainian pupils in Irish schools

One of the most challenging but rewarding tasks in Irish education recently has been welcoming and managing displaced children from Ukraine in our schools. As principals we are familiar with enrolling and offering education to pupils whose first language is not English. For over two decades, we have enrolled varying numbers of non-Irish-national children to our schools as their parents and families relocated to Ireland. We all recall the Polish influx in the early 2000s: beautiful children and families who simply sought work and a better life here.

Like many Irish schools, St Joseph's Primary School in Tipperary Town serves a diverse community – we now have 42% non-Irish-national children from 23 countries. In 2011, we lost our shared permanent EAL (English as an additional language) teacher and must appeal each year for language support for almost half our pupil cohort. This year we have one full-time EAL teacher and 20 hours part-time, which enables us to offer quality support and English-language lessons to these pupils and assist and settle newcomer pupils who arrive throughout the school year.

We currently have over a dozen Ukrainian pupils, each from a different region in their home country. In the last school year, we also had a 24-year-old Ukrainian graduate with excellent English; since October 2022, Olha Hnativ has been working for 10 hours a week in our school. Olha has helped the girls settle in, understand the systems in our school, and access their daily education. She is the bridge between them and their new school setting, with a language barrier and cultural differences to manage.

Olha, who has a master's degree in interpreting, taught children and adults in Kyiv before the invasion. She says the Ukrainian girls love school here: 'the school day is shorter in Ireland, with a more varied curriculum,



**Louise Tobin**

President of the Irish Primary Principals' Network

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**This article tells the story of how displaced Ukrainian children have settled into an Irish primary school and embraced the opportunities and learning in the Irish education system. It reports the opinions of teachers on their in-class experiences with newcomer Ukrainian pupils, and it includes a first-hand account by Olha Hnativ, a Ukrainian teacher who supported and taught our pupils.**

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including Music, Drama, PE [Physical Education], and Art, whereas back in the Ukraine, school was mainly focused on Maths and language learning.'

Our teachers report that our Ukrainian pupils in general made good progress at English, were strong at Maths, enjoyed the interactive online Irish lessons, participated well in Music – particularly in learning to play the ukulele – loved all PE classes and playing sports, and engaged very well with Art.

As regards friendships, our Ukrainian students made friends with fellow Ukrainians and Russian-speaking pupils initially, and then over time mixed with all students and made friends with all their classmates. Their teachers described them as generally very sociable, capable, and adaptable. They integrated well and settled in seamlessly. What a remarkable achievement and success story for these wonderful young children forced to flee their homes and country to escape the perils and dangers of war.

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For my own part as principal, and to create this sense of belonging for these most deserving pupils, I meet the Ukrainian pupils and their teacher, Olha, every week. I am learning some Ukrainian phrases and practise them weekly with these brave young ladies. At our weekly meet, we discuss customs in our countries, and I am hugely impressed at their efforts in acquiring English. They tell me they love Tipperary school.

At our monthly whole-school assemblies, after an initial settling-in period, our Ukrainian pupils gladly agreed to participate. They sang their national anthem to an audience in awe at their resilience. They shared other songs and poems at further gatherings and took part in the many Irish celebrations and dress-up days such as St Patrick's Day, Jersey Day, and Valentine's Day.

I would describe the Ukrainian people in Ireland as ambitious, determined people who want to make the best of a dreadful situation. They are delighted their children are learning English, and they are most appreciative of our efforts to include their children. I applaud our school leaders and staffs for welcoming over 15,600 Ukrainians into our schools and giving them a real sense of belonging. Let us remember:

*One book, one pen, one child*

*And one teacher can change the world.*

*— Malala Yousafzai*

## Ukrainian Children in Irish Schools

— Olha Hnativ

The Russian war against the Ukraine made every young innocent Ukrainian child become emotionally mature in a very short time. In my case, as a Ukrainian national seeking refuge in Ireland, I was so lucky to secure a job as an EAL teacher in Tipperary Town, working with Ukrainian pupils who had moved to Ireland to escape the war. My main priority for my pupils was to ensure a happy transition.

Ukrainian students are very happy in Irish schools and seem to settle in very well. Sometimes they just need a friend to listen to them and speak their mother tongue. Sometimes they just wanted to share their painful thoughts about the homes they were forced to leave, relatives they had happy memories of, or interesting stories about an ordinary happy life that was ruined by the war in the blink of an eye. That friend, for many displaced Ukrainian children, became their EAL teacher, a role I was very happy to take, and to befriend and support my young compatriots.

According to a survey we undertook among Ukrainian students at St Joseph's Primary School, all said they feel safe and are making friends with children of different nationalities. Ukrainian pupils love and respect their teachers in Irish school; they always say that their teachers and classmates are very nice, friendly, and supportive.

A Growth Mindset Programme that is worked on in the school helped Ukrainian children feel and share positivity, kindness, gratitude, and love. I also feel it helped to shape their personalities and vision in their new world. Children are aware that they are part of a supportive, diverse pupil community at St Joseph's, where they can rely on the principal and their teachers and classmates to ensure their inclusion and integration.

The school principal, Ms Tobin, has a special place in their hearts. The Ukrainian pupils look forward to their weekly meetings with her, where they share their ups and downs, tell about Ukrainian traditions and holidays, sing Ukrainian songs, and even teach the principal some Ukrainian words. Ukrainian students are not afraid of new experiences in their new school setting, even though there is a huge sense of loss and of course a language barrier.

But no one can deny the fact that there are some days when these displaced young children are upset. Their sadness is witnessed by the teachers, the principal, and their classmates. In most cases, these expressions of sadness are caused by the trauma of the war. There is a justifiable conflict at play constantly in their young minds, between their current reality and a desire to just go back home.

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They express much of their sadness through art. Drawings and craft ideas are a great illustration of their true sadness for their motherland. The unspoken language of art became the children's bridge for intercultural communication: they could reflect their true thoughts and feelings through singing, dancing, poems, drawings, DIY crafts, stage performances, and playing musical instruments.

Although the Ukrainian pupils had to join a completely new and truly different education system, they showed great courage alongside a desire to progress their education. They are so brave, not only to step into a new world of education and culture, but also to share their vision about ongoing events at their primary school through participation in the monthly assemblies, the celebration of national Irish holidays, sports weeks, the Growth Mindset Programme, and indeed contributing to these events by performing on the stage, singing, dancing, creating posters, and so on.

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It must be emphasised that there is a need for supports to enable Ukrainian children to access their education in Irish schools. The most challenging part of integration concerns language. Some Ukrainian pupils need EAL teachers. The Department of Education has put a lot of resources into providing additional teaching supports for Ukrainian learners, and that is definitely appreciated by both Ukrainian students and teachers. Ukrainian teachers, side by side with Ukrainian students, are warmly welcomed by loving, friendly, supportive Irish school communities, who showed great understanding and shared their best methods of teaching, and we are all very grateful for that.

It is worth mentioning that these brave, intelligent young ladies have a great desire and readiness to make new friends, learn a new language and culture, study, share their best ideas, and support each other. Looking at their happy faces during school breaks, one might wonder how it is possible that these young Ukrainian pupils who were forced to abandon their motherland, and are so vulnerable, have this enormous strength to fight for the opportunity to be heard and progress their lives and learning, knowing that there is no home and previous life to go back to, because it is destroyed.