

Psychological and Pedagogical Aspects of Adaptation of Displaced Ukrainian Children to the Educational Environment of Another Country

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Abstract

The sudden and unexpected war in Ukraine led to a large flow of citizens displaced abroad. Almost half of them are preschool- and school-age children. The peculiarities of their adaptation to the educational environment of another country necessitates the study of the main aspects of adaptation in these conditions. The aim is to identify the psychological and pedagogical aspects of adaptation to the educational environment of another country of school-age refugee children. The research included the use of surveys, questionnaires (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ), analysis of official information sources. The research found that the studied 203 children relocated to other countries have high rates of adaptation to the educational environment. Their performance indicators improved, high satisfaction with school, teachers, and relationships with classmates was revealed. The SDQ found a low overall level of adjustment difficulties ($M=16.3$, $SD=1.9$). The study showed that, in general, displaced Ukrainian children have high rates of adaptation to the educational space of other countries. They are emotionally stable, sociable, moderately hyperactive, have no behavioural disorders, and have high prosocial behaviour. The obtained results can contribute to the development of a programme to support Ukrainian children of immigrants to the educational environment of other countries, which will contribute to their psychological and pedagogical adaptation to it.

Keywords:

Adaptation, Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Educational Environment, Adaptability, Socio-Cultural Environment

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, became a crisis period for many citizens. A large number of people were forced to leave the country, seeking asylum in other countries. They include, in particular, a large proportion of children who had to adapt to the socio-cultural and educational environment of another country.

Analysis of data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicates an increased flow of refugees to European countries. According to the



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latest data, more than 7 million Ukrainian citizens were displaced abroad at the end of May 2022. As of January 31, 2023, a total of 8,046,560 refugees from Ukraine were registered throughout Europe. As the publication Visit Ukraine notes, in 2023 the largest increase in the number of refugees was recorded in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Ireland. As of June 30, the number of Ukrainians in the European Union was 4 million 70 thousand people. Most of them found asylum in Germany (28%), Poland (24%), and the Czech Republic (9%) (Visit Ukraine, 2023; Operational data portal, 2023). According to updated UNHCR data, there are 5,946,000 Ukrainian refugees in Europe as of November 21, 2023 (UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, 2023).

In connection with the war in Ukraine, the European Union implemented its directive on temporary protection for the first time (European Union, 2022b), stipulating that Ukrainians received the right to live, work and receive social assistance in EU member states.

Many countries have signed international conventions to guarantee the right of access to education for all categories of people, including displaced persons and refugees (Rușitoru, 2017; United Nations, 2013). These are mainly the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1950; United Nations, 1989), the European Convention on Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights & Council of Europe, 1950) and the European Social Charter (Council of Europe, 1961). In particular, the principles of the realization of the right to education, accessibility and effectiveness of education, equal access to education of vulnerable segments of the population, including refugee children and children seeking asylum, are specified in the European Social Charter (Convention on Refugees, 1951; Council of Europe, 1961).

However, the legislative regulation of the issue of relocation of Ukrainian citizens does not determine the aspects of their socio-cultural, psychological, and educational adaptation to the environment of another country. The issue of children's adaptation to the educational environment of another country deserves special attention (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). Children who are forced to flee their home country because of military operations are characterized by many psychological problems. These include communication problems (Chovpan, 2023), manifestations of negativism, psychosomatic disorders (Patel et al., 2023), emotional instability, etc. Besides, there is also the problem of adaptation to the education system and educational institution of another country. The adaptation, being intensified by a difficult psychological state, can be difficult and take quite a long time (Teleková et al., 2023; Albrecht & Panchenko, 2022). Different lifestyle,

habits, daily routine, mentality provoke anxiety and withdrawal of children (Pagel & Edele, 2022). Therefore, they need active pedagogical and psychological support.

In many countries, Ukrainian children are perceived positively, with sincerity and kindness (Lokshyna et al., 2022). There are many active programmes and organizations that provide them with material, financial, and social-psychological support. Nevertheless, forcibly displaced children experience psychological discomfort (Soylu et al., 2020) in the new educational environment, which is determined by the cultural environment of the new country, the lifestyle, the social position of the arriving family, and the child's personal qualities (Radhouane, 2023). This can lead to a decrease in their adaptation capabilities, behavioural disorders (Rușitoru, 2017), negative emotional experiences, conflicts in the school environment (Yohani, 2011). As some researchers point out, the main problems faced by children of forced migrants are the difficulties of psychological adaptation (Chovpan, 2023).

Therefore, the aim of the study is to determine the main psychological and pedagogical aspects of the adaptation of forced migrant children, which will contribute to the development of effective means of increasing their adaptability to a new educational environment. The aim involved the fulfilment of the following research objectives:

1. carry out a methodological analysis of the definition of the concepts "refugees", "asylum seekers", "displaced persons", "immigrants";
2. conduct a content analysis of the dynamics of Ukrainian children displaced abroad;
3. conduct a survey of immigrant families to identify schoolchildren's adaptation to the educational environment of another country.

Literature review

Before the full-scale war in Ukraine, the concept of displaced persons was mostly limited to the term "refugees". However, a significant number of people who left Ukraine after February 24, 2022, have different statuses. It is determined depending on the specifics and legislation of each country.

The Temporary Protection Directive for refugees from Ukraine (European Union, 2022a) uses the term "persons displaced from Ukraine". At the same time, the term "refugees" does not apply to the specified category of Ukrainian citizens. Therefore, we will rely in this work on the status of displaced persons, which reflects the forced resettlement of citizens as a result of military operations in Ukraine.

All displaced persons without exception undergo adaptation to a new environment. This is adaptation to the social environment, rhythm of life, financial situation, living conditions, language environment and communicative interaction, work, study, etc. School-age children who are undergoing all kinds of adaptation and require pedagogical support and psychological support need attention the most.

Buzarov (2023) notes that already existing local Ukrainian communities or their own social contacts played a significant role in the adaptation of Ukrainian displaced persons. In the later stages, international humanitarian organizations played a predominant role. However, the integration of displaced persons from Ukraine for permanent residence in European countries largely depends on language, age, education, labour, and social characteristics. Accordingly, the adaptation process will be more successful if actions are taken to provide social, psychological, and communicative support by the governments of European countries at the early stages of the relocation of Ukrainians (Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Poland, 2022; Kovács et al., 2023).

Adaptation is a two-way process based on the interaction of the individual and society, and contributes to the optimal correlation of the values of the individual and the group in which this individual stays (Berezka, 2022).

Understanding certain psychological and pedagogical aspects of the process of adaptation to the educational environment and creating optimal conditions can contribute to its positive course and alleviation of adaptation difficulties. It is quite important to facilitate the adaptation of children to the educational environment, otherwise it can negatively affect their health (Teleková et al., 2023).

Bozdač and Bilge (2022) point out the importance of establishing positive contact by refugee children with their peers and teachers at school for their successful social integration. This will contribute to their full adaptation to the new social and educational environment.

Adaptation in a new educational environment of another country can be accompanied by the influence of many factors. They include external factors (ethnicity and culture, social class, material situation, cultural environment of the new country) and internal factors (individual characteristics of the child: abilities, character, behavioural strategies). The most significant factors that influence the process of children's adaptation include the economic factor, the factor of uncertain status, the psychological state of parents, mental or physical injuries, and a favourable atmosphere at school (Chovpan, 2023).

Some researchers indicate that the interaction between the culture of the host society and the culture of the refugees, including education, is a key aspect of the transition to a new environment (Sung & Wahl, 2021).

Radhouane (2023) singles out two main problems in the adaptation of displaced children:

1. the need to develop a comprehensive approach to the adaptation of refugee children in order to analyse the adaptive processes before and after displacement, as well as contribute to the understanding of the children's attitude to education and the educational institution of the new country;
2. problems related to the relationship with parents, who are more difficult to adapt than children and can worsen the child's adaptation because of certain barriers, at the same time, the attitude and competence of educational institutions' staff in the host country are important factors in successful adaptation.

On March 31, 2022, the European Commission proposed key principles for the integration of Ukrainian refugee children into education systems of member states in its Policy Guidance on Supporting Inclusion of Ukrainian Refugees in Education: Considerations, Key Principles and Practice (Council of Europe, 2022). The priority in the document is the creation of safe places for refugee children, where they would feel like full members of society.

Lokshyna et al. (2022) established that the level of the integration of Ukrainian displaced children into the educational space of other countries is high, which contributes to their rapid adaptation to the educational environment. In particular, attention is focused on pedagogical conditions: the organization of education with due regard to the needs of the child, the opportunity to learn the language of the country, separate classes for displaced persons with a choice of additional subjects, the opportunity to simultaneously study online in Ukrainian schools.

According to some researchers, an even distribution of Ukrainian displaced persons among local children in classes is effective. This will make it possible for Ukrainian children to more likely adapt to the educational environment of another country (Lintner et al., 2023).

Important factors in the adaptation of Ukrainian displaced children to the educational environment are:

- educational strategies in which support comes from the school administration, teachers and peers;
- development of subject competencies in accordance with the curriculum of the host country;

balancing assessment strategies in order to promote the development of individual qualities of each student and guarantee the final control in parallel in the host country and in Ukraine (if children are studying in parallel) (Parmigiani et al., 2023).

Although Ukrainian displaced children are quite easily adaptable compared to refugees from other countries (Zindler et al., 2023), the issue of the main psychological and pedagogical aspects of Ukrainian children's adaptation to the educational space of other countries remains problematic.

Methods

Research design

The identification of psychological and pedagogical aspects of the adaptation of displaced Ukrainian school-age children to the educational environment of other countries was based on a questionnaire for parents created with the use of Google Forms. The study was conducted in the period from April 26 to October 20, 2023. The first stage of the research provided for an analysis of existing international legal documents, which classify the status of displaced persons from Ukraine and grant them the right to residence. The second stage involved a content analysis of the official statistics of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the number of families displaced abroad and the number of school-age children. The third stage was the search for displaced families took place through Facebook groups (Ukrainians in Poland, Ukrainians in Germany, Ukrainians in Romania, Ukrainians in Austria, Ukrainians in Italy, etc.), where they were offered a survey to determine children's adaptation and difficulties.

Sampling

The survey was created in Google Forms for conducting the research, which involved 230 families with school-age children who moved abroad. Each interviewed family has from 1 to 3 children, so the total number of children is 387. Of them, 224 are female and 163 are male. The inclusion criteria were the child's age from 6 to 16 years and moving abroad because of military operations after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The surveyed families live in 15 European countries: Poland (27), Germany (19), Bulgaria (21), the Czech Republic (18), the Netherlands (15), Austria (12), Romania (9), Slovenia (11), Spain (13), France (18), Norway (16), Turkey (12), Italy (12), Hungary (10), Sweden (17).

Methods

A questionnaire Child's Adaptation to the educational system of a foreign country in Google forms was created for the research.

The structure of the questionnaire included three blocks. The first block included general information about the family (number of children, age, gender, duration of stay abroad). The second block included 7 questions related to the organization of the child's educational environment:

1. Does the child attend an educational institution in the host country? (yes, no);
2. Do the teachers show support for your child and his/her educational support? (yes, no)
3. Are conditions created in the educational institution for the integration of your child into the educational space? (yes, partially, no)
4. Do you use electronic resources developed by European countries to improve the education of Ukrainian displaced children? (yes, not familiar with them, do not use them)
5. Does a psychologist work with your child? (yes, no, we don't see the need)
6. Is it possible to learn the language of the country for free? (yes, no)
7. How did the level of your child's academic performance change in the new class? (improved, worsened, remains unchanged).

The third block provided for determining the child's psychological state. It included 5 questions:

1. Is the child satisfied with communication with peers? (yes, partially, not satisfied);
2. How can you determine the psycho-emotional state of your child (positive, satisfactory, indifferent);
3. Do you notice that your child has become withdrawn since being in another country? (yes, the child's condition has not changed, no, the child is completely open);
4. Is your child satisfied with school and class? (very satisfied, partially, not satisfied);
5. Does the child have a desire to spend leisure time with new classmates? (yes, no)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to determine the characteristics of the child's psychological state. The questionnaire contains 25 items and is aimed at determining the child's emotional and behavioural development. It is used to determine whether the child has emotional or behavioural problems, and what is the nature of these problems. Each item should be evaluated with an answer — "False", "True to a certain extent" or "True". The questionnaire was created for children from 3 to 16 years old. The parents fill out the questionnaire for children up to 11 years of age, while children from 11 to 16 can do it independently. All questionnaire items are grouped into 5 scales (prosocial scale, hyperactivity

scale, emotional symptoms scale, behavioural problems scale, and peer problems scale).

A content analysis of informational statistical data of the UNHCR on the number of families displaced abroad and the number of school-age children was conducted to determine the number of children displaced abroad. The data on the number of displaced Ukrainian citizens are constantly updated on the organization’s website to monitor the dynamics of the movement of Ukrainian displaced persons and the directions of their movement.

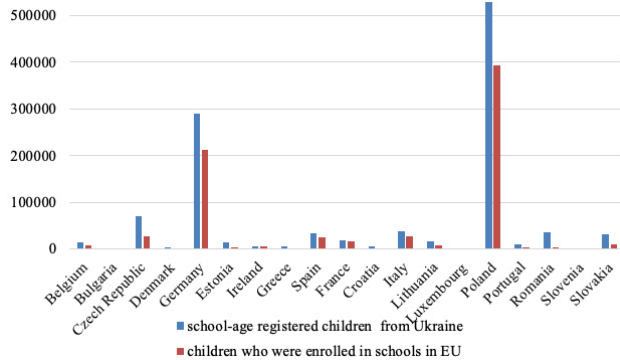
Ethical criteria of research

The survey was conducted anonymously, without specifying the respondents’ names and e-mail addresses. All studied families voluntarily completed the survey and provided information about themselves.

Results

The study showed that there were more than 600,000 school-age children abroad as of September 2022, with the largest number studying in Poland (Figure 1).

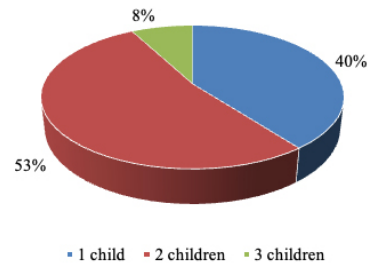
Figure 1.
Total number of displaced Ukrainian children and children studying in European countries



According to the figure, we can see that Poland and Germany hosted the largest number of displaced children. At the same time, only half of them attend an educational institution in the host country. In other countries, the number of arriving children is almost equal to the number registered in educational institutions. Such data indicate that displaced Ukrainian citizens continue to arrive in Poland and Germany, so the figures may be inaccurate.

According to the survey data, 230 families that participated in the study raise 1 to 3 children (Figure 2).

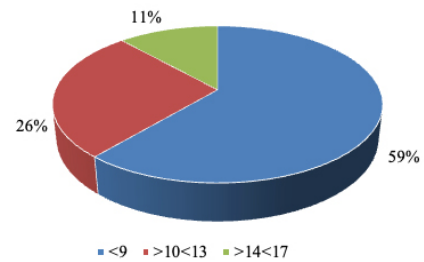
Figure 2.
The number of children in surveyed families



Most families have 2 children (53%), slightly less than half of the respondents have 1 child (40%), and only 8% have 3 children. The total number of surveyed families was 387 children.

The conducted survey determined that, the majority of the interviewed displaced children are children of primary school age (Figure 3).

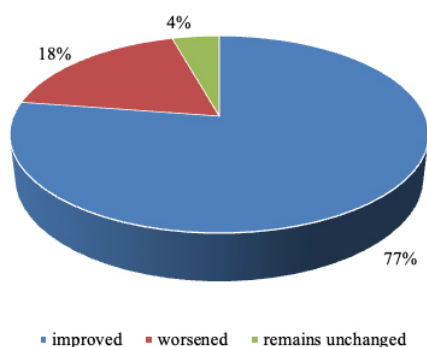
Figure 3.
Age classification of surveyed children



The questions of the second block established that among the studied families there is a very low percentage of those who are not satisfied with the state of the educational system or educational institution. A total of 90% of children attend an educational institution in the host country, of which 35% continue to study online in Ukrainian schools in parallel. At the same time, only 8% of the surveyed children are studying online and 2% are temporarily not studying. Such data show that almost all children are enrolled in educational institutions, most of them — full-time in local schools.

The majority of parents noted (87%) that teachers show support for children and provide them with educational support. According to the parents, the educational institution has created all the conditions for the integration of the child into the educational space (82%), a psychologist works with the child (75%), there are free language lessons (95%), there is an opportunity to use international educational resources for learning (84%). In general, as parents noted, the level of children’s educational performance has improved (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Level of educational performance of displaced children according to their parents



A total of 77% of parents believe that the level of their child's academic performance has improved, 18% have indicated that it has worsened and 4% have indicated that it has not changed. Such data indicate that there are children who, despite the created conditions of the educational space, still find it difficult to adapt to a new educational environment, a different culture and language.

Evaluating the child's psychological state, parents indicated that, in general, their children feel positive in the school environment (Table 1).

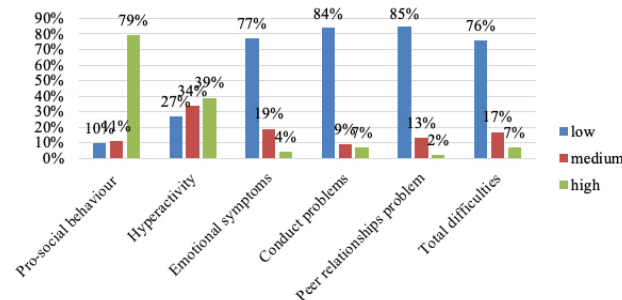
Table 1.
Indicators of psychological adaptation of displaced children to the educational space of another country

Evaluation parameters	satisfied	partially satisfied	not satisfied
Communication with classmates	80%	16%	3%
The school as a whole	67%	20%	13%
Teachers	77%	15%	9%
Organization of learning	71%	21%	8%
	positive	satisfactory	indifferent
Psycho-emotional state	85%	12%	3%

Among the surveyed families, a high percentage of those who are satisfied with communication with classmates (80%), the school as a whole (71%), teachers (77%), and the organization of education (71%). These children receive all the necessary services and conditions for educational integration, which contributes to their adaptation to the educational space of another country. The majority of parents identified the psycho-emotional state of the child as positive (85%), some noted that it was satisfactory (12%), and indifferent (3%). Such results indicate that a significant proportion of displaced children receives full support from the educational institution, they actively communicate with their peers, show interest in learning, in language learning, and come in contact with teachers.

Based on the results of the SDQ questionnaire, data were obtained that indicate a low level of adaptation difficulties for children displaced abroad (Figure 5).

Figure 5.
Scales of difficulties in the adaptation of children displaced abroad



According to the figure, children displaced abroad have a high level of pro-social behaviour (79%), a medium level of hyperactivity (34%), a low level of emotional problems (77%), behavioural problems (84%), problems with peers (85%). The general level of difficulties is low among the subjects (76%). The obtained indicators show a fairly high level of children's adaptability. They have a fairly positive psycho-emotional well-being, no mood swings, typical constructive behaviour, and positive relationships with peers.

The ratio of the general level of adaptation difficulties of displaced children by age and gender showed minor differences (Table 2).

Table 2.
Indicator of the level of general adaptation difficulties of displaced children

	Total difficulties		
	Mean	SD	N
age			
<9	8.2	1.1	227
>10<13	9.6	1.5	102
>14<17	12.4	2.2	58
gender	Mean	SD	N
male	16.3	1.9	163
female	16.8	2.7	224

The obtained results state that the smallest adaptation difficulties were found in the group of children under the age of 9 ($M = 8.2, SD = 1.1$), a slightly higher indicator — in the group from 10 to 13 years ($M = 9.6, SD = 1.5$), and the largest — among children aged 14 to 17 ($M = 12.4, SD = 2.2$). Although all indicators are low, younger children are still easier to adapt to external conditions than older children.

The analysis by gender established that there were no clear differences in the indicators of adaptation difficulties for boys ($M = 16.3, SD = 1.9$) and girls ($M = 16.8, SD = 2.7$).

The conducted research showed that the main aspects of adaptation of displaced children to the educational space of another country are psychological. It is the

psychological state that depends on the individual characteristics of the personality that determines the degree of its adaptability. Under the best organized conditions, the education of such children in other countries is optimal for their adaptation.

Discussion

The obtained results indicate that more than 600,000 school-age children have left Ukraine since the beginning of the war. Most of them started attending educational institutions at their place of residence. The issue of adaptation of displaced children has gained considerable importance, as the child's academic performance and emotional well-being depend on it (Rușitoru, 2017).

It is noted that maladaptation in the educational environment of a new country can negatively affect the already difficult condition of the child (Yohani, 2011; Panchenko, 2022). At the same time, a positive school experience plays an important protective role in overcoming the challenges associated with moving and adapting to a new educational environment (Patel et al., 2023; Bondarenko, 2022).

Radhouane (2023) points out that displaced persons are reluctant to seek help from support services and psychologists, so for children the environment of the educational institution is crucial in terms of adaptation. This shows that schools play a key role in the adaptation of refugee children from different socio-cultural structures to social life (Soylu et al., 2020; Cerna, 2019).

The results of the study showed that displaced Ukrainian children in a new educational environment have fairly high adaptation rates, which is due to the high level of organization of their educational conditions. Lokshyna et al. (2022) obtained the same results, who established that the educational policy of most European countries is oriented towards social, emotional, and psychological support of displaced Ukrainian children.

The problems with hyperactivity and emotional symptoms were identified among the problems of adaptation in a small number of children. Such results indicate that there were certain changes in the children's psyche as a result of military operations. They may feel emotional discomfort in direct or indirect psychological situations, which is intensified by the new social and cultural environment, educational space of another country. Zindler et al. (2023) also indicate the negative impact of experienced military operation on the adaptation of children, which reduces functional indicators.

The obtained data are consistent with the results of Lisowska and Łojko (2022) who found that the

adaptation of refugee children from Ukraine is determined by various factors, the most important of which are relationships with others. Berezka (2022) adds a psychological aspect to this, as the psychology of communication is the key to successful adaptation to the educational space. At the same time, the study revealed a significant number of children with adaptation disorders, in particular, the emotional spectrum disorder in displaced children, which contradicts the obtained data (Paoletti et al., 2023; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). It can be the result of directly experienced traumatic events related to war or the loss of loved ones. The surveyed families did not experience such events.

Conclusions

Therefore, the conducted research established that the largest international organizations (UN, UNESCO, OECD, EU Council of Europe) have actively participated in the development of strategies for the integration of Ukrainian displaced children into the educational systems of other countries since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, taking into account the already acquired experience of the functioning of education in times of crisis. Nevertheless, the developed recommendations cannot contribute to the full adaptation of school-age children to the educational environment of another country for many reasons. The data obtained during the survey indicate that there is a small, but still significant percentage of children who find it difficult to adapt to a new country and educational space.

There are different types of support for Ukrainian displaced children. What they have in common is the emphasis on children's personal needs and interests, their full support, integration into the educational space based on humanistic principles and in optimal formats, ensuring access to all educational services on a par with other children. However, continuing education according to Ukrainian educational standards and programmes remains an urgent problem as some families still plan to return to Ukraine.

The shortcomings of the study are primarily the constant flow of Ukrainian immigrants abroad, which changes the statistics of displaced persons every week. Therefore, it is difficult to establish valid indicators. The realities of the war force an increasing number of citizens to leave their country and seek asylum in other countries. This significantly reduces the demographic indicators of Ukraine, the level of education of the population, and also makes corrections in the process of becoming a state. It is difficult to control the number of displaced persons, as not all of them leave legally, and not all of them have yet decided on their choice of country and resettlement status. This limits the control over their movement. In turn, almost all countries that accept Ukrainian displaced persons

do not conduct regular monitoring of children's adaptation to education. Therefore, parents' survey is the only way to determine the extent of children's adaptation, which complicates the research, as not all parents are willing to cooperate.

Determining psychological and pedagogical conditions for the effective integration of Ukrainian displaced children into the educational space of another country is considered promising. Another promising direction is the development of a system of synchronizing the educational environment of foreign countries and Ukraine in order to improve the adaptation of displaced children to the educational space.

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