

Peace of mind and peace on land: education for Ukrainian refugee children
Ukraine and Austria • Connecticut College • Summer 2023 • Olha Vasylyv '23 (from Ukraine)

Overview

My project promotes peace-oriented education among Ukrainian refugee children who were internally or internationally displaced during the armed conflict started by the Russian invasion in February 2022. This project seeks to empower Ukrainian students through a curriculum centered around conflict resolution activities focused on embracing national heritage, and exploration of academic and professional opportunities in the realm of peace-making. To achieve these objectives, I will spend June/July of 2023 in Kyiv and Vienna leading daytime academic summer camps for student refugees. I have established a partnership with European Collegium (EC), a school that has a campus in Kyiv and a center for Ukrainian asylum-seeking students in Vienna. The school administration has given their full consent to the project. The camp in Ukraine will serve 50 primary and middle school students, while the center in Vienna will focus on 30 high schoolers. I plan to implement an age-sensitive curriculum into the existing summer program to address the educational goals of each group, while acknowledging the ongoing need for psychological support from counseling staff on site. These students have seen the hardship of migration, so I am dedicated to helping them extract vital skills from these experiences with the support of professionals.

Centering around therapeutic art and discovery of Ukrainian history, I want to help students embrace difficult emotions during these unprecedented times of war and give them resources to make dreams about a peaceful future become a reality. The completed curriculum consisting of lectures, workshops, and reflections will be shared with the largest Ukrainian educational NGO, *Osvitoria*, to be spread among local schools and refugee centers abroad. The on-site staff will be trained to promote peace-centered activities in their coursework, creating a butterfly effect within groups of students outside of the camp. Reflections on peace, migration, and national identity will serve as a starting point and toolbox for developing a cohort of student leaders to contribute to conflict prevention in the future.

Background and Demonstrated Need to be Addressed

The Ukrainian education system was disrupted by three major socioeconomic and military crises in the past decade. Since the Russian occupation of Donbas and Crimea in 2014, families from the areas spent weeks looking for shelter before their children were placed in schools across the country. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the entire Ukrainian education system operated remotely for almost two semesters. The most recent crisis – the full-scale invasion launched by Russia in 2022 – created the need for psychosocial support, especially among minors. During the first 8 months of the conflict, approximately 630,000 children attended sessions to address their mental health needs caused by displacement and military intervention. These data signify that Ukrainian students require assistance with well-being strategies¹. As a response to 2,528 attacks on education facilities in 2022², newly founded initiatives, such as SavED and Ukraine Global University, serve as markers of the need to bring innovative solutions into education through restoring educational facilities and creating new opportunities to reflect on the on-going conflict.

Implementation Strategy and Timeline

EC day camps are conducted every summer with a focus on cultural humility that on-site teachers and psychologists developed over the years. I plan to insert the peace-oriented components into the camp structure in consultation with the ongoing staff. Using a framework developed by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine and their partners in UNESCO³, we will design daily schedules to implement the expertise of the on-site teachers at EC and recruited speakers. For two weeks, we will cover a variety of topics that stress the cultural and socioeconomic power of Ukraine through five two-day modules (M): M1 – What is peace? (reflection on memories about life before war); M2 – Embracing life under missiles (exploring art therapy as ways to cope with stress); M3 – Ukrainian “superpowers” (learning about the hidden gems in Ukraine;

¹ Matiashova, Lolita, et al. "Children growing up in conflict zones in Ukraine and beyond need urgent mental health support." *The Lancet* 399.10336 (2022): 1689-1690.

² Abreu, Saviano, and Tanya Lyubimova. "Ukraine: Situation Report, 26 Oct 2022." *ReliefWeb*. 28 Oct. 2022. Web.

³ Kitsoft. "Psychological Support And Care." *Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine*. Web.

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exploring regional traditional cultures); M4 – Understanding through dialogue (conflict prevention and mitigation strategies); M5 – Rebuilding Ukraine (exploration of opportunities to revitalize Ukraine).

In early May, I will send out a camp participation application to schools in the Kyiv region and to Ukrainian refugee management organizations in Austria. In late May/early June, we will conduct training for the EC staff and other camp leaders. The first two weeks of June, I will lead the camp in Kyiv, and the following two weeks in Vienna. Due to the established partnerships with catering services, the Kyiv camp will provide students and staff with lunch; the Vienna campus will offer a brunch bar. The air defense sirens might disrupt the curriculum flow in the camp hosted in Kyiv, but the staff on location will be trained to use study areas in the underground shelter. In the event that wartime conditions will not allow the program to take place in Kyiv, we will offer a more extended program in Vienna.

Experiences and Qualifications

Inspired by my summer internship in the Ukrainian Embassy in France, I decided to continue supporting refugees from my home country, especially those whose education has been interrupted. The experience of creating cultural programming in the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Paris helped me solidify my logistics and communication skills, as well as gave me an understanding of academic and extracurricular needs of Ukrainian children abroad. I was able to engage in conversations with mothers of children who had to assimilate into the French education system, and their comments and thoughts shaped my idea of the format of the daytime summer camp. In addition, as I am writing my Honors Thesis on the acceptance of and interest in cultural programming focused on Ukrainian heritage, I am planning to enhance my research with interviews with the president of the Association Franco-Ukrainienne Côte d'Azur, a board member of Ukraine Global University initiative, and parents of children whose education was disrupted by war or forced them to move abroad. Lastly, I received a grant to help supply the EC bomb shelter with art therapy materials to help children cope with the stress caused by air defense sirens. Having worked with on-site counselors, I established connections to continue working on covering the school needs. Thanks to these experiences, I have developed the network, skills, and knowledge to support my future project.

Assessment and Sustainability

Prior to camp, I will gather students' reflections on questions around peace; a post assessment with similar questions will be conducted to evaluate the evolution of their thoughts on conflict. I will also gather the final feedback from parents and students to adjust the curriculum and share it with the Osvitoria NGO for publication on their portal for educators. To measure the impact, I will rely on the number of users that engage with the published materials with a goal to reach 500 clicks. The curriculum will also be shared with the Network of School Principals in the Kyiv region to help increase the impact of the project outside of EC.