

Qualitative Research in Education
Volume 15, Issue 1, 27th February 2026, Pages 40-56
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.14781>

Socio-educational Factors in the Reception of Ukrainian Refugee Minors in Spain Through the Protagonists' Voices

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Abstract

The conflict in Ukraine has led to the displacement of millions of children and their mothers, posing an unprecedented challenge to host countries such as Spain. The aim of this paper is to analyse the perceptions of refugee children and their mothers of Ukrainian origin on the social and educational factors that influence their reception process in the Spanish education system. A qualitative approach was adopted, with 26 participants, 13 mothers and 13 children aged between 8 and 15 years. The results obtained were classified inductively into three categories of analysis: barriers to educational inclusion, facilitators of educational inclusion and suggestions for improving this process. As a strength, the commitment of the actors involved was demonstrated by an unprecedented protective response. However, significant barriers were identified in relation to language immersion, the attention and understanding of teachers and classmates, the workload of the school and the invisibility of their circumstances and needs, which compromised the process of welcoming refugee minors. In conclusion, all social and educational agents should contribute to an effective response to the migration paradigm, for which it is essential to guarantee the fulfilment of the right to quality education for all minors.

Keywords

Refugees, families, Ukraine, inclusive education, right to education.

To cite this article: Lorente-Avilés, S., Caballero, C.M. y Alcaraz, S. (2026). Socio-educational Factors in the Reception of Ukrainian Refugee Minors in Spain Through the Protagonists' Voices. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 15(1), pp. 40-56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.14781>

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Qualitative Research in Education

Volumen 15, Número 1, 27 de febrero de 2026, Páginas 40-56

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.14781>

Factores Socioeducativos en la Acogida de Menores Ucranianos Refugiados en España desde las Voces de los Protagonistas

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Resumen

El conflicto ucraniano ha provocado el desplazamiento de millones de niños junto a sus madres, suponiendo un enorme desafío para países receptores como España. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la percepción de menores refugiados y sus madres de origen ucraniano sobre los factores sociales y educativos que influyen en su proceso de acogida en el sistema educativo español. Se ha empleado un enfoque cualitativo con 26 participantes, concretamente 13 madres y 13 menores, de entre 8 y 15 años. Los resultados obtenidos se han clasificado inductivamente mediante tres categorías: barreras a la inclusión educativa, facilitadores de ésta y propuestas de mejora para dicho proceso. Como fortaleza, se ha evidenciado la comprometida actuación de los agentes implicados mediante una respuesta inaudita de protección. No obstante, se han hallado importantes barreras sobre la inmersión lingüística, la atención y comprensión de profesorado y compañeros, la carga escolar y la invisibilidad de sus circunstancias y necesidades, comprometiendo el proceso de acogida de los menores refugiados. En conclusión, todos los agentes sociales y educativos deben contribuir a proporcionar una respuesta eficaz al paradigma migratorio, para lo cual resulta imprescindible el cumplimiento del derecho a una educación de calidad para todos los menores.

Palabras clave

Refugiados, familias, Ucrania, educación inclusiva, derecho a la educación.

Cómo citar este artículo: Lorente-Avilés, S., Caballero, C.M. y Alcaraz, S. (2026). Factores Socioeducativos en la Acogida de Menores Ucranianos Refugiados en España desde las Voces de los Protagonistas. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 15(1), pp. 40-56
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The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War (Bansak et al., 2023). Since the European Union approved a protection framework for Ukrainians fleeing their country, Spain has become the country with the fifth largest number of Ukrainian civilian refugees. The majority of these civilians are middle-aged women with one or more dependants, especially minors (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2022). It is precisely the reception of these refugee minors and the guarantee of their fundamental rights, such as the right to education, that has become a major challenge. For this reason, this study seeks to identify the main barriers and facilitators that refugee minors and their mothers encounter in their reception process by the Spanish education system.

The importance of this analysis underlines the urgency of including refugee children in mainstream classrooms as soon as possible in order to give them the best chance of school success, as refugee status has been reported as a factor influencing school failure in Spain (Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2020).

Research by Ndibalema (2024) indicates that host countries' education systems cannot adequately respond to the needs of these children. The most frequent and significant impediment is limited proficiency in the host language (Kaukko and Wilkinson, 2020). Escarbajal et al. (2019) highlight that the learning environment can also pose difficulties, particularly during the first years in the new system. Moreover, insufficient support mechanisms in compulsory schooling risk perpetuating inequalities (McBrien et al., 2017). Furthermore, rigid reception structures and limited transparency regarding changes in protection status generate uncertainty and family instability (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2022). Additionally, studies such as that by Escarbajal and Leiva (2017) have identified a lack of experience in hosting refugee minors and a deficiency in intercultural training for teachers. As evidenced by the findings of O'Leary et al. (2020), the provision of such training is crucial for the improvement of inclusive reception processes.

Similarly, the works of Toros et al. (2024) and Vrdoljak et al. (2022) identify limited peer support as a barrier to integration with refugee pupils struggling to build positive relationships at school. For Angelidou et al. (2019), this relationship is crucial for enhancing the social competence of refugee children. Psychological barriers also hinder adaptation (Orenes, 2022) as direct exposure to destruction, violence, displacement and forced separation from parents results in symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (UNICEF, 2023), as well as anxiety and depression (Javanbakht, 2022). Other significant barriers identified by the research are related to xenophobic and discriminatory situations experienced by refugee children in schools. In this regard, Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara (2015) highlight that 60% of refugee minors are victims of bullying, a particularly concerning issue in the case of Spain, as evidenced by the work of Esteban and Romero (2021). It is also highlighted that socio-economic barriers extend beyond the educational sphere, with a notable impact on it (Baker et al., 2022). Recent studies have identified housing and employment as the two primary obstacles in the reception process, which have a negative impact on the refugee child's schooling process (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2022; González, 2022). Finally, the UNHCR (2023) identifies the

complex and lengthy administrative procedures and the reluctance to attend school in the host country's educational institutions, in the hope of a possible return.

Despite these barriers, several facilitators support the reception process. In Spain, the government implemented a reception and protection plan with key organisations, enabling rapid access to work and residence permits, accommodation, financial support, early schooling, language reinforcement and comprehensive care services. As Muñoz (2006) points out, Spain has a long history of receiving refugees due to its favourable land and sea entry routes. In a reactive manner, Spain has gradually developed legislation that guarantees the fundamental rights of refugees. This legislative evolution can be consulted in Manchón (2024).

Another facilitator highlighted in González's (2022) research is the support of family members of Ukrainian origin already residing in the host country. Dreidi et al. (2024) indicated that the quality of the mother-child relationship influences a child's emotional and behavioral well-being and, therefore, their school adaptation. Similarly, the support of other Ukrainian families hosted in the same host country, with similar situations and needs, is another facilitator highlighted. In fact, Zimba and Gasparyan (2023) consider that this support network represents a new family that has an important value in tackling the challenges and difficulties that these people encounter in their reception process by the education system. Social organisations further ease school integration by guiding enrolment and promoting inclusive environments (Hordiichuk et al., 2022). Accordingly, Kolmodin (2024) posits that, at the local level, a diverse array of support organisations must be engaged and coordinated to address the multifaceted needs of the community. This collaboration is essential for safe and structured schooling process (Pagel and Edele, 2022). Indeed, in the current international migration context, Dryden-Peterson (2024) warns that the time has come to address the gaps between access, learning and opportunity through a multi-layered and collective approach, with all educational, political and social actors playing their part in ensuring quality education for refugees. The literature also notes strong public solidarity towards Ukrainians, perceived as culturally proximate, as shown by widespread donations and temporary accommodation offers in Spain (Powell and García-Encina, 2023).

International studies underline the urgency of integrating refugee children into mainstream classrooms to maximise their chances of success. According to Crul et al. (2019), many refugee children do not participate in compulsory education in countries such as Turkey and Lebanon, whereas in European countries such as Sweden and Greece they do. Other studies, such as those by Mareci et al. (2023) for the Romanian case and Will et al. (2021) for the German case, suggest that access to education for refugees is mainly limited by linguistic, bureaucratic and legal barriers, whereas facilitators include programmes that address refugees' social and educational realities. However, little is known about how the Spanish education system receives refugee minors from the perspective of the minors and their mothers. Thus, several research questions arise: have they encountered barriers in their reception process in the Spanish education system? What are these obstacles and facilitators? What proposals do they formulate to improve it? Understanding these answers is essential to remove the barriers to ensuring the inclusion of refugee minors in the Spanish education system. As Gemmink et al. (2021) advocate for paying attention to local contexts, this study focuses on one of the south-eastern regions of Spain. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are intended to construct a framework of reference for other regions and future processes of receiving foreign minors.

The overarching objective of this study is to analyse how Ukrainian refugee minors enrolled in compulsory basic education, and their mothers, perceive the social and educational factors shaping their reception within the Spanish education system. The specific objectives deriving from this objective are:

1. To describe the barriers perceived by refugee minors and their mothers on their reception process in the Spanish educational system.
2. To find out the facilitators perceived by refugee minors and their mothers to reduce the barriers in their reception process in the Spanish educational system.
3. To identify the proposals for improvement made by refugee minors and their mothers to improve their reception process in the Spanish education system.

Method

Research Design

The research design employed a qualitative approach. This approach was selected to enable participants to be given a voice and to narrate their situation in the first person as a producer of knowledge (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). In terms of depth of analysis, this is a descriptive study designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, including an examination of its structural composition and interconnections (Saldaña and Omasta, 2021).

Participants

The participants were 26 individuals of Ukrainian origin who were hosted in a city in south-eastern Spain. Of the total, 13 were mothers and 13 were their children aged 8-15 years.

Concerning to the mothers' collective, as can be appreciate in the Table 1, the mean age of the participating mothers was 37 years (SD = 4.91; Range = 27 to 43 years). The majority of participants (N = 8) had previously been employed, with two self-employed, two working in the household, and one unemployed. Most mothers had one child (N = 6) or two children (N = 6), while one had three. Concerning the geographical origin of the mothers in Ukraine, four were from the south (Mykolaiv, Odessa, Kherson), four from the east/southeast (Donetsk, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia), two from the north/northwest (Kyiv, Zhitomir, Bucha), two from the northeast (Kharkiv) and one from the west (Lviv).

Table 1

Characteristics of Participant Mothers

Participant mothers	Age	Previous employment situation	Area of origin (Ukraine)	Number of children
Mother 1 (Mo1)	36	Employed	East/southeast (Dnipro)	1
Mother 2 (Mo2)	34	Employed	South (Kherson)	1
Mother 3 (Mo3)	41	Employed	North/northwest (Zhitomir)	3

Participant mothers	Age	Previous employment situation	Area of origin (Ukraine)	Number of children
Mother 4 (Mo4)	43	Work in the household	East/southeast (Dnipro)	2
Mother 5 (Mo5)	27	Unemployed	South (Odessa)	1
Mother 6 (Mo6)	42	Employed	Northeast (Kharkiv)	2
Mother 7 (Mo7)	38	Self-employed	East/southeast (Donetsk)	2
Mother 8 (Mo8)	36	Work in the household	Northeast (Kharkiv)	2
Mother 9 (Mo9)	40	Employed	South (Kherson)	1
Mother 10 (Mo10)	27	Employed	North/northwest (Kyiv, Bucha)	1
Mother 11 (Mo11)	39	Employed	East/southeast (Zaporizhzhia)	2
Mother 12 (Mo12)	39	Employed	West (Lviv)	1
Mother 13 (Mo13)	35	Self-employed	South (Mykolaiv)	2

On the other hand, as shown in Table 2, regarding to the main characteristics of refugee minors, the mean age was 11 years ($SD = 2.06$; Range = 8 to 14 years). 61.5% identified themselves as male ($N = 8$) and 38.5% as female ($N = 5$). 69.2% were enrolled in a Spanish public school ($N = 9$), 15.4% in a private-subsidized school ($N = 2$), and 15.4% in a private-private school ($N = 2$). 76.9% ($N = 10$) were studying simultaneously (Spanish on-site school and Ukrainian online school), 15.4% ($N = 2$) were enrolled only in a Spanish on-site school and 7.7% ($N = 1$) were enrolled only in a Ukrainian online school.

Table 2

Characteristics of Participant Minors

Participant minors	Gender	Age	Type of school (Spain)	Concurrent studies
Minor 1 (Mi1)	Male	9	Private	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 2 (Mi2)	Male	11	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 3 (Mi3)	Female	8	Private	Spanish on-site school only
Minor 4 (Mi4)	Male	12	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 5 (Mi5)	Female	12	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 6 (Mi6)	Female	12	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 7 (Mi7)	Male	9	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 8 (Mi8)	Male	13	Public	Ukrainian online school only
Minor 9 (Mi9)	Male	14	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site

Participant minors	Gender	Age	Type of school (Spain)	Concurrent studies
Minor 10 (Mi10)	Female	13	Public	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 11 (Mi11)	Male	8	Public	Spanish on-site school only
Minor 12 (Mi12)	Female	10	Private-subsidized	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site
Minor 13 (Mi13)	Male	8	Private-subsidized	Ukrainian online and Spanish on-site

The selection of the sample of participant corresponded to a non-probability convenience sample (Latorre et al., 2005). The main selection criterion was the accessibility and availability of the participants. However, other criteria were considered to ensure variability of characteristics between cases. About the participating mothers, the following criteria were applied: a) participation representative of the area of origin, which was particularly affected by the war conflict; and b) participation of mothers who had children under their care, of school age and residing in Spain, because it is the principal profile of Ukrainian refugees in Spain, as points out by European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA] (2022). For its part, in the case of refugee children: a) representative participation according to the gender variable; and b) schooling in Compulsory Basic Education, because it is one of the international community's ongoing commitments (United Nations [UN], 2015).

Data Collection Techniques

The focus group technique was used as a method for collecting information (Krueger and Casey, 2014). This technique promotes mutual support among participants, fosters a climate of trust and enables open discussion. A total of four focus groups were applied: two groups in which mothers participated (Group 1 = 7 and Group 2 = 6) and two groups in which refugee children participated (Group 1 = 7 and Group 2 = 6). These were grouped according to several criteria: a) that each group did not exceed the maximum number of participants recommended in a focus group (Barbour, 2013); b) that the mothers could not condition the minors in their responses and vice versa; and c) that they had a similar level of Spanish language.

An *ad hoc* script of questions was designed following the indications of Escobar and Bonilla-Jiménez (2009). The initial version was based on prior fieldwork and knowledge of the participants' context. After presenting it to the groups, a joint brainstorming session enabled relevant modifications. The final script was validated through expert judgement, involving two specialists in the subject and one in question design.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants were reached through an entity that provides Spanish classes to the Ukrainian refugee community. The project was presented to the entity's administrators and users. Following their approval, four focus groups were conducted in two classrooms made available by the foundation. On the first day, the focus group was conducted with mothers, and on a

subsequent day, the focus group was conducted with their children. The third and fourth days proceeded in a similar manner. It was decided to initiate with the mothers, with the intention of familiarising them with the research dynamics and encouraging their participation in the subsequent focus group with their children. The focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. For the data collection, audio recordings of the technique were used, and field notes were taken to collect relevant information. The research was approved by an ethics committee of a Spanish university. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the anonymity and confidentiality of any data that could identify the participants throughout the research process and dissemination of results was guaranteed. Furthermore, the ethical considerations of the research were considered. The mothers were provided with an information sheet about the research and were asked to sign an informed consent form. All these documents were provided in both Spanish and Ukrainian languages.

Data Analysis

The information produced by each focus group was recorded in audio format. A total of four files were accumulated. Each file was transcribed verbatim into a single editable text document. This was followed by content analysis of each transcription document using the qualitative statistical support software ATLAS.ti (version 8 for Windows). This software allows the transcripts of the information collected in the focus groups to be systematically coded and analysed. This analysis followed an inductive model, assigning categories and codes based on the participants' textual quotations. Table 3 illustrates the categories and codes that were applied during the data reduction and information classification process.

Table 3

Book of Categories and Codes of Information Analysis

Categories	Codes
Category 1. Barriers to reception	1.1. Lack of knowledge of the language 1.2. Simultaneity of studies 1.3. Educational support measures 1.4. Mental health 1.5. School bullying 1.6. Administrative difficulties
Category 2. Facilitators of the reception	2.1. Associations and/or foundations 2.2. Ukrainian refugee community 2.3. Spanish schoolmates 2.4. Resident family 2.5. Native population
Category 3. Proposals for improvement	3.1. Educational support measures 3.2. Socioeconomic assistance 3.3. Operation of social entities 3.4. Welcoming loved ones to Spain

Results

The presentation of results is organized around the specific research objectives through the most significant textual quotations provided by the participants in relation to each of the codes of the three categories of analysis established (Table 3).

Specific Objective 1. To Describe the Barriers Perceived by Refugee Minors and Their Mothers on their Reception Process in the Spanish Educational System

A total of 90 quotes were found on the barriers to the reception of refugee minors by the Spanish educational system. The main barrier to the reception process highlighted by the participants was the *lack of knowledge of the language* (N = 25): “Spanish has been the biggest problem, for sure” (Mo6). This barrier had an impact on the academic performance of refugee minors, even experiencing a decline in their grades: “My son lowered his grades, especially in science, language... subjects with a lot of content to study and write” (Mo2). It also influenced the social and interpersonal level, especially regarding processes of adaptation and interaction with others: “I had a hard time adapting because of the language, I felt apart from the rest and really did not want to go to school” (Mi7). In addition to this difficulty, there was insufficient linguistic immersion in Spanish schools. This meant that the children had to learn the language on their own: “The help they were offered at school was very brief, then they had to learn on their own as best they could” (Mo8), as the school did not encourage this process of support: “In my school, they only help us with the language during the first few weeks. Besides, I have friends whose schools didn't even help them” (Mi4)

Furthermore, the *simultaneous studies* between the Spanish and Ukrainian educational system (N = 17) were considered as another barrier due to the increased school load that implies, as one of the participating mothers points out: “Since my son attends school in Spain, he can no longer connect live to the Ukrainian classes, and has a lot of homework, so he tries very hard to keep up with everything”(Mo1). Nevertheless, they take on the complicated challenge, if they do not become detached from their home school environment, as one of the participating mothers’ notes: “I wouldn't want my son to lose contact with his Ukrainian school for anything in the world. It keeps him connected to Ukraine and his life there” (Mo12). Moreover, the children themselves do not want to lose contact with their classmates in Ukrainian schools: “It's hard for me too, but I don't want to lose contact with my Ukrainian school, I don't want to forget my classmates and I don't want them to forget me” (Mi5).

In addition, the participants point out the *absence of measures or actions to support* and/or reinforce the needs of refugee children (N = 17). On the one hand, they indicate a lack of flexibility concerning the teaching load to be assumed by refugee children, as one participating mother remarks:

The teachers have not considered the double school load that our children have, as they remain attached to their Ukrainian school. They have done nothing to help them reconcile their schedules and, in addition, they give them more homework to reinforce their Spanish (Mo3).

Conversely, participants have indicated that there is a dearth of ongoing language support or the use of translation aids: “When the children ran out of the reinforcement they had the first few weeks, they were prevented from using a device to translate the words they didn't understand” (Mo8). Child participants also highlighted the lack of support they received for language translation: “They could have given us a translator or at least allowed us to use our phone, which they only let me use for the first week” (Mi6). The participants link this lack of support or school reinforcement measures to teachers' insufficient training to respond to the reception needs of refugee minors: “I think they are not experienced or prepared for these cases” (Mo2), without underestimating the involvement of teachers in these processes: “I think the teachers have done what they could because they did not know how to help us more” (Mi5).

Following closely in number of citations to the previous codes, participants perceive their *mental health situation*, caused by their country of origin, as an obstacle to their reception process in the Spanish education system (N = 16), as one of the participating mothers underlines:

My daughter went through things that no child should experience. We spent 11 days hidden in a cellar in Bucha and escaped through a forest before the city was liberated. We helped evacuate as many people as we could and faced some very tough situations. I try to keep her from thinking about it, but she has suffered a lot (Mo10).

These experiences, inevitably, continue to be present and condition their foster care process, especially at the beginning, as this child acknowledges:

I felt bad at first, because I couldn't return to Ukraine. I didn't want to go to school or make new friends... I just wanted things to be as they were before, until I understood the situation and had to adapt (Mi7).

Bullying was also identified as a significant obstacle in the process of welcoming students (N = 9). The participants attributed this phenomenon to two primary causes. First, because of their late incorporation and lack of knowledge of the language: “I was left out by some classmates because of the language and because I was new to the school” (Mi11). Secondly, because of the xenophobia of some classmates, which even led to class changes, as one of the participants claims: “My older son had problems with some classmates and, because he is shy, it was difficult for him to express it. He eventually told his teachers, and they changed his class, so he is better now” (Mo13).

Finally, the difficulties in managing the children's schooling in Spain were considered a barrier to the reception process (N = 6). On the one hand, the participating mothers emphasize the *complicated administrative procedures* for their children's schooling:

I first arrived in Barcelona and had problems with the paperwork. I had to wait a month before my child could attend to school. When we didn't get it, we moved here, but still had to wait months for the required documentation (Mo5).

On the other hand, the interruption of on-site schooling has been prolonged by the reluctance of the refugees to go to school in the Spanish school, in the hope of a possible return to Ukraine:

I don't want us to have to stay here forever. I trust that everything will work out and we will be able to return, that's why I didn't want to start at the Spanish school, but I'm afraid that we won't be able to (Mi8).

Specific Objective 2. To Find out the Facilitators Perceived by Refugee Minors and Their Mothers to Reduce the Barriers in Their Reception Process in the Spanish Educational System.

A total of 79 quotes from the participants alluding to the facilitators of the reception process by the educational system were found. In the first place, the *support of associations and/or foundations* (N = 25) is shown as the main facilitator of the reception process of refugee minors: “I am very grateful to the associations that have helped us because, thanks to them, we have managed without owing money to anyone” (Mo6). This support is especially significant in the case of minors, who often sought language support from organisations rather than schools:

I was helped a lot by my teacher from the foundation with Spanish and I am very grateful to her, because she is giving me the reinforcement that I have not received at school and that I needed to adapt well (Mi11).

Secondly, participants highlight the support of the *Ukrainian refugee community* in the same situation (N = 22), as the following mother points out:

The support of the Ukrainian community has meant everything. We connected quickly because we are going through the same thing. We, mothers, are united in dealing with formalities, jobs and housing, and our children can count on Ukrainian friends at school and in their residences and so they feel safer and less lonely (Mo4).

The children say that this feeling of community or new family has helped them to cope with the difficult process of adaptation: “In my class there are other Ukrainian children. We are going through the same situation, and we can talk and feel close. Many of us also know each other from the hotel or the Spanish classes” (Mi9).

Thirdly, the *assistance of Spanish peers* in their new educational establishments has also proved to be an invaluable facilitator in the process of integrating refugee minors into the Spanish educational system (N = 13). Above all, the welcoming attitude of the local children is highlighted: “I think the children are friendly, caring and open to meeting others. That has helped my son a lot, being in a new environment and having to start from scratch” (Mo2), as well as their willingness to support the needs of refugee children: “In my class several classmates have helped me and the positive atmosphere has supported me” (Mi3).

Fourthly, the *help of Ukrainian relatives* living in Spain before the 2022 conflict (N = 10) appears as a facilitator of the reception of Ukrainian minors and their families: “From the

beginning, my sister, who moved to Spain years ago, took us into her home from the moment we arrived, helped us with all the formalities, the job search... I feel privileged” (Mother 10).

This reality has also been crucial for the reception of the minors who have been able to start from scratch in a safe, familiar and stable nucleus, according to textual quotations such as the following: “Our aunt’s support has given us a home, food and clothes. We feel very lucky” (Mi10).

In the fifth instance, the participants identify the *assistance of Spanish citizens or residents in Spain* as a facilitating factor for the process of integrating into the Spanish educational system (N = 8): “I was grateful to meet a Spanish woman who work in a real estate agency and spoke English well. She helped me a lot, especially with my son’s schooling” (Mo6).

Furthermore, the benevolence of certain volunteers from associations or foundations extends beyond the linguistic immersion: “I have been helped a lot by my teacher from the foundation, not only with the language, but she has always been concerned about me and my mother” (Mi1).

Specific Objective 3. To identify the Proposals for Improvement Made by Refugee Minors and their Mothers to Improve their Reception Process in the Spanish Education System

A total of 81 quotations were obtained in relation to this objective. The most recurrent proposals from the participants were those referring to *measures or actions to support* the needs of the child (N = 24). Thus, the participants propose, on the one hand, to increase the reinforcement of the native language in the educational centres, as they perceive it to be scarce, as expressed by both the mothers' collective: “I wish the rest of the children had been helped with Spanish at their school like my daughter has been helped at hers” (Mo9), and the children's collective: “I would like them to help us more with Spanish at school” (Mi12).

Conversely, they propose adjustments to the school and homework load to allow students more time for leisure activities and extracurricular pursuits, thereby facilitating a return to a more childlike state of mind. For example, mothers miss not being able to spend more time playing with their children in the street: “I wish I didn't have so much homework load between the two schools, I really miss being able to play in the street with other children” (Mi13). Similarly, refugee children highlight the overload of work and demand more time for leisure or play, as the following refugee child points out:

I would also ask to have less homework or more time off to be able to connect from time to time to the Ukrainian school and be able to manage it better, having more free time to play or do activities (Mi1).

Closely following the previous one, the main proposals for improvement are medium- to long-term *socio-economic assistance* (N = 16), which includes a double aspect: access to rental housing, together with access to a decent job for the parents, as the following quote from one of the participating mothers illustrates:

In my case, as many families, I live with my son in a residence and I need to find a rental house, but there is very little housing available, and they do not want to rent to refugees. However, the most

necessary thing now is to find a decent job. We don't want the government to give us aid, but we can only get jobs as cleaners, cooks or in the fields, with very small salaries (Mo5).

This situation has a direct impact on the reception process for families, with children in particular experiencing concerns that extend beyond the school environment: “I would like to change the hotel for a house to have our space, but I especially want my mother to find a job. I miss seeing my mother happy with her job” (Mi2).

Additionally, participants have expressed a desire for *enhanced management by the associations* that serve them (N = 11) from two distinct perspectives: the request for more information from the NGO that manages the reception plan and the request for greater collaboration between associations:

We do not understand why we have not been informed of what is going to happen to us and our children. We are afraid that we will be sent to other places and that the children will have to start again from scratch in another school (Mo11).

A significant number of participants have proposed that the entities collaborate to ensure that the aid provided is compatible, thereby enhancing economic and residential stability: “We ask the associations to work together to support us, especially in finding job, so that we can rent a house, stay in the same city and avoid our children having to change schools” (Mo3).

Finally, another proposal widely requested by the participating minors is that of *welcoming their loved ones in Spain* (N = 10). This is particularly relevant given the forced separation that they have suffered, especially from their parents, called to the general military mobilisation. This longing is perceptible in the quote from the following minor, who only makes the following proposal for improvement: “I would be satisfied with my father coming, I don't ask for anything more. I miss him very much” (Mi4).

Discussion

This study analysed the perception of refugee minors and their mothers of Ukrainian origin on the barriers and facilitators that influence their reception process in the Spanish educational system, as well as to know their proposals to improve this process. In the line with the first objective, the participants point out the lack of knowledge of the language as the main barrier, consistent with Kaukko and Wilkinson, (2020). This difficulty was perceived as hindering academic performance, as reflected in the work of Escarbajal et al. (2019). Participants highlighted insufficient support for effective language immersion in schools, echoing McBrien's (2017) findings. Such shortcomings exacerbate the pressure faced by minors enrolled simultaneously in Spanish and Ukrainian schools, as the system struggles to respond to the additional workload and their specific educational needs.

The findings suggest shortcomings in the diligence of teaching staff when supporting refugee minors. This aligns with Escarbajal and Leiva (2017), who reported insufficient intercultural training and experience among education professionals, despite the many benefits that such training can have on a child's educational development, as stated by O'Leary et al.

(2020). Mental health challenges also emerged as a major barrier, reflecting the vulnerability of refugee minors. These results are consistent with Javanbakht (2022), who identified high rates of PTSD, anxiety and depression among refugee children.

As Bansak et al. (2023) indicate, it may be crucial to first provide psychological care to help children cope with trauma and limit its impact on learning, as also suggested by Orenes (2022). Furthermore, Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara (2015) state that 60% of refugee minors are victims of bullying, in line with Esteban and Romero (2021). In this sense, half of the minors reported such experiences. Mothers additionally highlighted the challenges of schooling in Spain, in line with the UNHCR report (2023), including lengthy administrative procedures and reluctance to pursue education due to expectations of return. These findings support previous research showing that such obstacles significantly hinder the integration of refugee minors into the education system (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2022; González, 2022).

Regarding the second objective, the study identified several facilitators that may counterbalance the barriers previously discussed. Refugee minors emphasized the crucial support received from associations and foundations to obtain the help that their educational center of reference does not provide, consistent with McBrien et al. (2017). Mothers also highlighted these organisations as key sources of assistance for securing work and residence permits, housing and basic needs. Furthermore, the strong support within the local Ukrainian community offered emotional comfort and practical help, reflecting findings by Zimba and Gasparyan (2023).

This results also show strong support from native classmates for refugee minors' inclusion, which may relate to cultural proximity and empathy regarding their situation (González, 2022). Participants reported more positive peer reception compared to recent studies such as Toros et al. (2024) and Vrdoljak et al. (2022). Such welcoming attitudes can foster inclusive values among younger generations and support social integration (Angelidou et al., 2019). Some participants highlighted the great support provided by relatives already living in the city, who facilitated their reception process at a social and educational level, as also highlighted by González (2022). To a lesser extent, participants mentioned the support of Spanish citizens or residents in Spain, especially in relation to the altruistic help of volunteers and strangers. In addition, the help of host families is particularly important, as Powell and García-Encina (2023) note, as a sign of the first wave of solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Finally, regarding the third objective, participants proposed measures to improve their reception process, prioritising greater Spanish language reinforcement in schools. They also strongly called for socio-economic support, particularly access to housing and stable employment, reinforcing González's (2022) position. In addition, the textual quotes obtained draw a profile like that of Baker et al. (2022) on the undervalued potential as an economic asset of refugees. As O'Leary et al. (2020) note, this can have an impact on the social and personal development of refugee minors, as well as on their academic performance, which requires a comprehensive teaching approach in consonance with their reality.

In line with Garcés-Mascareñas (2022), participating mothers called for improved management by support organisations to reduce the insecurity generated by their uncertain future. According to Pagel and Edele (2022), keeping children in structured and safe family environments should be prioritised. Better coordination among organisations was also requested to ensure that support responds effectively to diverse needs, according to the findings

of Hordiichuk et al. (2022). These results align with recent qualitative findings (Kolmodin, 2024) and reinforce the need for a shared, coordinated effort in socio-educational integration processes, as Dryden-Peterson (2024) warned. Finally, it should be noted that almost all of the participating children proposed to receive their relatives in Spain, after their forced separation. The nostalgia that can be deduced from their words has already been pointed out by UNICEF (2023) and considerably hampers the process of adapting to their new social and educational life, as their thoughts and hopes are anchored in their home in Ukraine and in those who had to stay there irrevocably.

Conclusion

Regarding the first specific objective, several social and educational factors have been identified that negatively affect the reception of refugee minors in the Spanish education system, revealing tensions in the government's reception plan. Among them, significant gaps were identified in support addressing the socio-emotional conflicts suffered by these students because of the traumatic situation experienced and the consequent negative impact on their adaptation and progress at school. These factors are particularly relevant in the absence of an effective compensatory response to reduce inequalities at the level of linguistic or curricular flexibility, in addition to the psychological disadvantages.

On the other hand, concerning the second specific objective, it is also fair to mention the unprecedented effort made by European, national and local institutions to activate and apply with speed, determination and guarantees a legal and social protection framework to which the Ukrainian collective could be admitted must be appreciated. Consequently, interventions and support should be aimed not only at the individual or their family, but also at strengthening their community.

However, regarding the third specific objective, the reception system must step up its efforts to provide adequate reception and support measures for displaced minors and their families for a period appropriate to their circumstances to ensure effective reception. To this end, measures must be activated to guarantee the stability and security of families, facilitating the integration of the migrant and refugee community into the labour market and their access to housing, where children can start a new life project in a safe and familiar environment. This would also help them to feel useful and valued while enabling their real integration into society. Likewise, resources should be increased to guarantee the necessary linguistic immersion of these minors by means of an effective protocol.

Therefore, concerning the general objective of this research, all social and educational actors must adopt the multiculturalism derived from the new global paradigm, thinking about the economic, social and educational reconstruction to be undertaken. In this context, it is essential to extrapolate them at the education level. In this sense, the educational guidance team and the tutors of each group would play an important role as competent agents for the implementation of specific measures that allow for an inclusive and effective response to this reality within schools at different levels. It is also essential that teachers have adequate intercultural training to enable them to implement these measures with due understanding and care, from a holistic perspective of schooling. But, above all, it is necessary to guarantee the fulfilment of the human

rights of all those affected in general and of minors in particular, from the fundamental right to life to the essential right to education.

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