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Supporting Youth in Ukraine During the Russian Invasion

ABSTRACT. During the Russian invasion, hundreds of children in Ukraine have been supported by people around the world in unique ways. Creative strategies have been employed to continue school experiences as well as mentoring opportunities and acts of kindness. This paper will describe how virtual teaching has sustained the educational levels of many of the children who stayed in Ukraine during the war as well as the how the involvement of youth from around the world demonstrated support of the children who have endured the invasion of their country.

KEYWORDS: children, war, Ukraine, support

Introduction

During the spring of 2022, two projects began with the intent of supporting boys and girls as well as teens still in Ukraine during the Russian invasion. Both projects continue to be active as the war rages on. They exemplify the desire of people from around the world to support those in need and to especially offer opportunities to continue to keep life as normal as possible for those enduring war.

One project involved 18 teachers from the United States who volunteered to support students who remained in Ukraine. Over 100 students have been taught since July of 2022 using creative virtual methods from these teachers since most of the students involved did not have access to school.

In addition, a group of 19 students from around the world became a part of the Teen Advisory Board for the Multimedia Showcase called International Expressions of Kindness which created opportunities for kids from any country to show their support for the youth still in Ukraine during the war.

These methods of supporting boys and girls in Ukraine have ensured that they know they are not forgotten and that the world is constantly working to support them. These two projects will be detailed in this manuscript to highlight the support for people around the world.

Effects of the Russian invasion on Ukraine

As of January 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported more than 7,000 deaths of Ukrainian civilians. Most Ukrainian men have stayed in the country to fight against this invasion which has divided almost all Ukrainian families. Millions of Ukrainians have fled to other countries which has resulted in a major humanitarian crisis. Poland reportedly admitted about 8.9 million refugees and has accepted larger numbers than any other country. Russia, Hungary, and Romania have also received large numbers of refugees and all countries are assisting Ukrainian students with school assimilation.

However, many Ukrainians decided to stay home and not flee the war. The reasons for this vary, but many simply did not want to leave their husbands, sons, or other family members who stayed to fight against the Russians. Others felt that they did not have anywhere to go or were too frightened to move to a new country as it is an unknown entity to them. Others chose not to leave their pets or needed to care for elderly family members. Still more felt that they could stay to help with the war effort like supporting key jobs such as the distribution of food, hygiene products, and medicines to those still in the country including the Ukrainian soldiers.

Statistica.com reported a 35% forecast change in Ukraine's GDP in 2022 (2023) which has drastically affected the economic state of the country. Because so much has been destroyed and jobs have been lost, the invasion is making a major negative change in the fiscal health of the country. Families have reported that they are struggling to find a variety of food options, medical care is not always possible, and recreative opportunities are now non-existent. Electricity and power are not consistent which also affects the lives of all Ukrainians who are still in the country. With fears

of a missile strike, children and adults have trouble sleeping at night and rarely feel safe. They live with daily feelings of terror and hatred for the demolition of their beautiful country.

Due to all of these hardships, people from around the world have sought ways to support the people of Ukraine—those in country as well. The support of teachers as well as a small group of teens have made an important impact on the boys and girls who remain in Ukraine.

Support from Teachers for Students Remaining in Ukraine

In the late spring of 2022, a former education professor from California visited Poland with the intent of finding a way to support the children who are leaving the country of Ukraine. He worked diligently at the border to support the refugees by setting up camps and activities for the children who were passing through. While working with these small groups of children, additional volunteers were needed in the Polish schools where the immigrants would settle. This education professor then led physical education classes as well as basic English classes for the boys and girls who were new to Poland. Because of his interest and desire to actively work with children, he was introduced to a representative from the United Nations Commissions for Refugees who had begun to compile a list of children still in Ukraine and not able to attend school. He reached out to the lead author, who is a professor in special education, and the two of them began a quest to find willing and compassionate teachers who would support boys and girls in Ukraine virtually.

Recruiting teachers for this sensitive project consisted of sending a message to the education professors in the state of California as well as stellar former students who are now teachers in the United States. These volunteer teachers had to be aware of what would be appropriate to discuss with the children of war. The majority of the boys and girls have fathers who are fighting against the Russians; thus, fear and violence have been a part of the children's daily lives from the beginning of this project.

Eighteen teachers from California, but also, Texas, Ohio, and Oregon joined in the effort to support the boys and girls in Ukraine. Each teacher took 2–9 students depending on needs and schedules. Teachers created curriculum after meeting individually with the families and determining what would best support the students. Teachers and students were connected initially by using WhatsApp to communicate. Most students

worked on their English skills and the teachers used Google Translate as well as Babble, Berlitz, and Duolingo which offered free language courses for Ukrainians to quickly immerse themselves in a new language as needed.

Teachers remained in communication with one another to share ideas and collaborate on ways to support the students as this was a new venture for all. Teachers shared their opportunities to discuss the war by using the following online resources: Savethechildren.org and unicef.ie/stories/resources. Both resources guided the teachers with appropriate conversation starters to open up the dialogue about what the boys and girls were facing daily in Ukraine during this time of war. Teachers were sensitive and extremely careful when discussing the invasion, but students regularly opened up and shared their nervousness about the future, their daily fears about what would happen to their families and cities, and their terror regarding the explosions that they heard regularly.

In addition, the teachers used other online resources to help teach the students English including: Waterford.org/resources/free-audiobooks-for-kids, Rd.com/list/free-audiobooks-for-kids, YouTube videos, and Kahoot.com (pre-made games which included English greetings). Many of the students were given weekly vocabulary words to practice. Other ideas that the teachers used to support the students included the following: (1) food demonstrations using English descriptions, (2) students presented in English on the history of Ukraine or key holidays in their country, (3) students and teachers would watch part of a movie together in English and then discuss parts of the movie, and (4) teachers used Oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts and Ocean.si.edu/ocean-life to focus on science-based topics if the students expressed an interest in this subject. As needed, teachers were able to contribute to a local Ukrainian fund to get school supplies to the students as well.

Overall, the teachers focused on Josh Shipp's impactful short video called *The Power of One Caring Adult* which focused on his time as a foster youth and how one person made a major difference in his life. Teachers regularly shared pictures and inspiration with one another as teaching students living in war was difficult and painful to experience. The teachers sometimes felt that they could not truly understand what the boys and girls were experiencing, but by their encouragement of each other, they were able to continue this important work that supported their students and remembered the focus on "one caring adult" to make an impact on each life during such difficult times.

International Expressions of Kindness Showcase Support from Teens

In early January 2022, a small group of academics and practitioners, mostly members of two nonprofit organizations, Action for Media Education and Association for Moral Education, launched the International Expressions of Kindness: Multimedia Showcase. Initially, it was planned to create a safe, virtual space for children worldwide to express their feelings and thoughts on kindness. No one could predict then that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would instigate a new turn and direction of the project which oriented its Youth Advisory Board towards the support of Ukraine. Boys and girls in Ukraine were actively sought out to submit entries to the Showcase as well as to be able to read and witness the support of international youth entries from all over the world.

Thus, because of this project, teenagers from around the world mobilized to get their communities to support the youth in Ukraine at the start of the war through the International Expressions of Kindness Multimedia Showcase. There were 19 students on an advisory board between the ages of 12–17 from seven countries (South Korea, Russia, China, New Zealand, India, Poland, and United States) which encompassed four continents who attended bi-monthly zoom meetings. During these meetings, they discussed ideas for how they and the regions they live in could support children living in Ukraine during the invasion. They specifically talked about showing them kindness from around the world and also paying it forward by modeling acts of kindness in their honor.

Each teen on the advisory board was required to submit a showcase entry demonstrating kindness in one of the following categories: arts and crafts, technology innovations, music and dance, written word, and videos. For example, the second author chose to involve her dance team in supporting the boys and girls in Ukraine so she created Ukrainian flags and messages for each dance team member to hold while sending positive thoughts and prayers to them through photographs. She also advertised the multimedia showcase on her social media sites which gave neighbors, friends, classmates, and family members an opportunity to participate and spread kindness in a creative way. Increasing awareness of the war was also an important goal to keep students involved in caring for others. This helped children internationally to be cognizant of other children around the world who were dealing with extreme hardship. Each advisory board member was required to secure at least three additional entries for the showcase besides their own.

The International Expressions of Kindness Multimedia Showcase highlights wonderful ideas for anyone interested in spreading kindness including the following categories on the website: Resources for Children and Educators, Family Projects, Group Projects, and Child-Generated Kindness Curricula. Its mission is to provide a vehicle for children worldwide to share their thoughts and feelings about kindness and the many diverse ways it can be expressed. The goal is to provide youth an opportunity to act on their right of free expression through realistic, inspirational, ambitious, and motivational acts. Curriculum included on the website is for boys and girls ages 3–18 and their families. The primary aims include: (1) encouraging children to think critically and reflect about the meaning of kindness; (2) helping children recognize and acknowledge acts of kindness locally/nationally/internationally; (3) encouraging children to create, in their own unique voices, media messages about kindness that they would want to share with the world; (4) creating a safe, virtual space for children worldwide to express their thoughts and feelings about kindness; and (5) building a better understanding of children's perception and expression of kindness.

The third author and her colleague, Amy Spangler, expanded the work of the multimedia showcase to create curricula materials titled *Connect with Kindness—Child-Generated Teacher-Friendly Curricular Materials* broken down by the following age groups: 4–10, 11–13, and 14–18. The materials for 4–10 year old boys and girls were also translated into Spanish. The materials were then tested in a pilot study during the fall of 2022 which included children from Cote d'Ivoire, Croatia, El Salvador, India, Italy, Lithuania, Nigeria, Portugal, Turkey, the United States, and Venezuela. The goal is to add these materials by continent to the showcase website. In addition, kindness vocabulary was developed for the different age groups. Also, due to this project, the third author and developing of the kindness curriculum will be teaching a course at the University of Turin in Italy this spring.

Conclusion

People around the world rallied to help those in Ukraine during this past year of the Russian invasion which rages on. Numerous supportive acts have occurred, but this manuscript highlighted two key movements. One showcased the support of a group of teachers around the United States

who believed that continued education would increase the knowledge and the spirits of the families remaining in Ukraine. The second project was instrumental in encouraging Ukrainian youth by demonstrating acts of kindness from numerous countries in their honor. The humanity of these two projects impacted many lives around the world and continues today.

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