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Article

Engaging Ukrainian students in reception phase education: Teacher perspectives from Denmark and Finland

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Abstract

The arrival of large numbers of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's war of aggression in 2022 required Nordic

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countries such as Denmark and Finland to reconsider how schools receive and engage newcomers. This study explores teachers' views and beliefs about Ukrainian students, their life histories, and engagement in education in this historical context. Previous research has shown that teachers' beliefs are closely linked to their educational practices, which play a central role in creating affordances for students' engagement in school life. This is why teachers' and professionals' beliefs about teaching, learning, reception and engagement may play a crucial role in the reception of newcomers. Through a nexus analysis of data from two Nordic reception contexts, some shared discourses, perspectives and challenges emerged. The teachers generally reproduced welcoming discourses; however, their interpretations were shaped by broader discourses on both 'good reception' and potential trauma, which created an image of these transnational students as particularly vulnerable and in need of a safe environment. At the same time, in the teachers' discourse, Ukrainian students were constructed as an exceptional group with a strong academic background but rooted in a different school culture. The results point to notable similarities between the two cases, which reflect a shared Nordic perspective on schooling, learning, and engagement that often remains implicit. However, the study suggests that in the context of transnational students, explication of this Nordic perspective may improve intercultural understanding.

Keywords: student engagement, school ethnography, nexus analysis, second language, Ukrainians

Introduction

The arrival of large numbers of Ukrainians fleeing the war in 2022 forced Nordic countries such as Denmark and Finland to rethink how schools receive and engage newcomers. In Denmark, special legislation targeting children and youth displaced from Ukraine (Særloven, 2022) enabled municipalities to establish dedicated schooling for Ukrainian migrants. Although Danish reception education has included varied models – separate reception classes for newcomers, direct mainstream enrolment and mixed models (Skiveren et al., 2024) – the introduction of Ukrainian-only classes marked a new development. It also changed language policy, allowing English and Ukrainian in addition to Danish as languages of instruction.

In Finland, the spring of 2022 brought a sudden influx of school-age migrants, also to rural regions with little or no experience of such newcomers or of second language instruction. The municipal responses varied: some supported Ukrainian online schooling, whereas others quickly opened preparatory classes (Frick & Kapranov, 2023; Kärkkäinen et al., 2026). By early April 2022, nearly 100 new preparatory classes served over 1,000 Ukrainian students (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2022). The presence of Ukrainian teachers also enabled novel bilingual education models in some cases (Opetushallitus, 2022). By autumn 2022, as the war persisted and the EU Temporary Protection Directive (European Union, 2001) unified reception and schooling practices, all school-age Ukrainians entered Finnish schools, typically starting with one year of preparatory education before being gradually integrated into the mainstream classes. Although the Finnish Act on Integration (Laki kotoutumisen edistämisestä, 2023) emphasises

interaction and reciprocity with the receiving society, which is reflected in inclusive, two-way policy frameworks and curricula, the Ukrainians' arrival showed that schools nevertheless struggle to address diversity and to support students with migrant backgrounds (Mustonen et al., 2023; Mustonen& Suni, 2024). Since schooling is a key point of access to society for children and young people (Ager & Strang, 2008; Kaukko, Neuhaus et al., 2026), the way in which they are received in schools significantly affects their future prospects.

Previous research has shown that student engagement is shaped by teacher–student relationships (Fredricks et al., 2004) and in turn influences academic achievement (Lei et al., 2018). Teachers and school professionals thus play a central role in enabling students' engagement in school life. On the other hand, research has also shown that teachers' classroom practices are connected to their own beliefs about teaching and learning as well as their views of students' engagement in class (Borg, 2018). That is why this study examines teachers' understandings of Ukrainian students' engagement or disengagement in second language settings in Denmark and Finland and explores the following research question from a nexus analytical perspective:

> *RQ: What kind of discourses, life histories and interaction orders shape teachers' understandings of how to engage Ukrainian students in school and classroom activities in Danish and Finnish contexts?*

The data set draws on multi-sited school ethnography from two research projects in Finland and Denmark, it and is analysed using a nexus analytical approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This approach enables an analysis of how sociopolitical and local discourses shape teachers' pedagogical choices (see Kaukko, Dryden-Peterson et al., 2026). The identification of these discourses and teachers' ideas about Ukrainian students' life histories, and how they surface in classroom interaction, may help improve future reception practices and the teaching of Danish and Finnish as second languages for future migrant students.

We begin with an overview of the theoretical framework and prior research. Next, we introduce the data and the nexus analytical approach, followed by the analysis and the findings. Finally, we discuss the key results and outline the pedagogical implications.

Prior research and theoretical reflections

Discourses on Ukrainians in the Nordic context: Sympathy and othering

Across many EU countries, Ukrainians fleeing the war were initially met with both symbolic sympathy and preferential treatment (Reilly & Flynn, 2022), and this was reflected in political and media discourses. In Finland, the political discourse was highly supportive early on, and authorities and civil society quickly mobilised assistance (see e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2026). In Denmark, the general

discourse on refugees is sceptical and politically supported by restrictive policies on housing, school districts and temporal protection (Jacobsen & Piekut, 2022; 2023); however, special legislation granted Ukrainians rights unavailable to others (Lov om midlertidig opholdstilladelse til personer, der er fordrevet fra Ukraine, 2022), including tailored reception classes and Ukrainian as an accepted language of instruction. In both countries, Ukrainians were represented discursively as more culturally similar to the majority population than other forced migrants, most recently asylum seekers from SWANA countries (Blinkenberg & Øland, 2026; Lehto, 2025), and in that sense, this groups of migrants can be considered to be discursively and politically constructed as exceptional.

On a general level, migration discourses are often othering: they may portray migrants as a threat to national security or as users of scarce resources (Kaukko et al., 2025a). Ukrainians, however, are typically seen as deserving shelter and support (Fuller, 2024; Kirkwood, 2017; Lehto, 2025; Näre et al., 2022). The Finnish media have portrayed Ukrainians either as vulnerable, suffering and innocent victims or as resilient survivors (Martikainen & Sakki 2024), although such stereotypical framings have been criticised for limiting the agency of refugees (Xu, 2021). It has been shown that young Ukrainian people in Finland resist these narratives themselves and highlight that they are just young people living their lives (Kärkkäinen et al., 2026).

Within education, refugee students are often framed through a deficit discourse, although research has emphasised their linguistic and cultural assets (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). Norms of 'Danish' or 'Finnish' behaviour shape expectations in the classroom, and migrant students are often seen as needing correction (Millei, 2019; Souto 2022). Teachers may draw on discourses of liminality, 'an in-between state' (Dziuba et al., 2025) and position Ukrainian students as temporary visitors likely to return home soon (Mustonen & Enbuska, 2025), and they may treat learning as a 'neutral activity', overlooking the political, cultural and social factors that shape both pedagogy and student lives (Petäjäniemi et al., 2024). In this context, it is important to consider how school professionals' affordances for action are influenced by societal discourses about migration (Jacobsen & Piekut, 2023) even if they are at odds with their personal beliefs and values. In such cases, professionals may actively challenge unequal treatment or try to overcome the cognitive dissonance caused by it through the framing of Ukrainians as particularly deserving (as shown by Blinkenberg and Øland (2026) in relation to frontline immigration workers.

Student engagement as a socioculturally embedded practice

According to a review study by Pedler et al. (2020), several different definitions of the concept of 'student engagement' exist. Here, we draw on the much-cited definition by Fredricks et al. (2004), which describes student engagement along three dimensions: the behavioural, the emotional and the cognitive. Using this

definition has the advantage of acknowledging that engagement may vary along these dimensions and that the presence of one type of engagement may not always entail the other two.

'Emotional engagement' refers to students' affective reactions in the classroom, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety' (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63) and is also associated with identification and the sense of belonging (or not). 'Cognitive engagement' refers to students' 'thinking about, reflecting on, using learning strategies about and solving problems in relation to subject matter, whereas 'behavioural engagement' is more easily observable, as it refers to students' conduct in the classroom: paying attention, asking questions, spending time on tasks, and so on (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Engagement is a complex, reciprocal process involving students, peers and teachers and affected by the sociocultural environment (Wang et al., 2019). Within this social complexity, teachers have a key influence on interaction and participation (Pedler et al., 2020). Although student agency and engagement depend partially on the students' individual prerequisites, they are strongly shaped by sociocultural context and teacher practices, which can scaffold or hinder agency and engagement (see Wang et al., 2019).

Teacher beliefs about student engagement

Teacher beliefs significantly influence practice, even though practice does not always reflect professed teacher beliefs (Borg, 2018; Pedler et al., 2020). Implicit beliefs and ideologies shape teachers' expectations of second language (L2) learning and participation and their means of engaging learners in classroom practice and interaction (Krogager Andersen, 2021; Woods, 2003). Recognised and culturally valued forms of participation are reinforced (Guo & Laokulrach, 2023), whereas unrecognised ones may dwindle away. With respect to students with a transnational background, a key question is whether forms of engagement and their recognition by teachers vary across cultural contexts. Our exploration of teachers' beliefs about Ukrainian students' engagement in Finland and Denmark contributes to shedding light on this issue.

Data and methodology

The Danish data come from a collaborative, transdisciplinary (Klein, 2018) school ethnography project in a municipal primary and lower secondary school specifically appointed to receive Ukrainian migrant students in 2022. The aim of the project was to explore the special reception education developed for Ukrainian students with a focus on opportunities for participation. The data were collected over the course of one school year by alternating members of a transdisciplinary group of researchers who visited the school, observed lessons and talked to students and staff on a regular basis with the aim of generating a multi-faceted description of this specific reception and L2 learning context. In the process, interviews were conducted, in which focus on the teachers' views on and experiences with the reception of the Ukrainian

students, their teaching practices, student participation, the collaboration with parents and the organisation of reception education.

The Finnish data come from a participatory school ethnography in two educational institutions: one in a rural area and another in an urban environment. The students were young people aged 16+ who had fled Ukraine and were studying Finnish in transitional education provided for those who need to strengthen their readiness for studies in upper secondary education. The Finnish study aimed to collaborate with the teachers to support their teaching practices. In both schools, the researchers participated in lessons and interviewed both teachers and students. The teachers were informed about the study's themes: Ukrainian students' Finnish language learning, engagement and sense of belonging. The interviews were thematic and narrative, and the researchers' observations were also incorporated.

In the data sets from both Denmark and Finland, we focused on extracts in which teachers and other school professionals expressed their views on the students' engagement and non-engagement and their own efforts to engage the students. This means that for this particular study, we were not interested in the observed practice as such, but rather in what the teachers had told us about it during field conversations or in what we interpret as underlying their ways of teaching in terms of their understandings of students' engagement. The data and participants are described in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Data overview

Data type	Country	Participants	No. of files	Days/months of fieldwork
Field notes	Denmark	3 teachers	43 text files	35 days/9 months
Interview	Denmark	3 teachers	3 interviews	
Fieldnotes	Finland		57 text files	8 days/5 months
Fieldnotes	Finland		76 text files from 24 days of observation over 7 months	24 days/7 months
Interviews	Finland	5 teachers	4 interviews	

Table 2. Participant overview

Country	Teacher alias	Subject	Experience	Qualified reception teacher?	School Context
Denmark	TD1	Math	Long experience	No	Urban
	TD2	L2 Danish	Long experience	Yes	Urban
	TD3	Class teacher	Long experience	No	Urban
Finland	TF1 & TF2	L2 Finnish	Long experience	Yes	Rural
	TF3	Society/social studies	Short experience	No	Rural
	TF4	L2 Finnish	Long experience	Yes	Urban
	TF5	Guidance counsellor	Long experience	Yes	Urban

The fieldwork in the two contexts was conducted in compliance with ethical standards and procedures in Denmark and Finland, respectively, including implementing informed consent procedures carefully and exercising ethical reflexivity throughout the research process from the data generation, through the analysis to the dissemination.

Methodological approach

Our methodological approach is nexus analysis (Scollon, 2004; Scollon & Scollon, 2003), which draws on several linguistic and anthropological research traditions. The definition of 'nexus' is that is a social action which is the object of research – in this study, this is the teachers' understandings of how to engage Ukrainian students in school and classroom activities in their L2. In nexus analysis, the researcher starts by asking how a social action (engaging students) emerges at the nexus (intersection) of individual life histories ('historical bodies'), interactions ('interaction order') and surrounding discourses ('discourses in place'), and what its potential consequences are (Lane, 2009). In this study, life histories are represented by the teachers' knowledge and assumptions about Ukrainian students' prior schooling paths and schooling culture, experienced trauma, migration and resettlement in Nordic countries. *Interaction orders* are the observed and narrated participation patterns in the classroom. The *discourses* that potentially affect the social action include discourses on reception practices in schools, on goals set in curricula and on Ukrainians as a migrant group in general.

Limitations

The article draws on data from two different studies relating to the reception of Ukrainian students in different Nordic contexts, which both focus on a collaborative and transformative research agenda. However, our research design has certain limitations. The analyses rely primarily on the teachers' perspectives, and the settings examined represent only selected examples of schools that have received Ukrainian students. Furthermore, since the data were collected with broader research foci, the observations and interviews were not strictly aligned with our theme. It is inherent in nexus analysis that certain themes emerge across all the three analytical dimensions intersecting within the nexus; in this case, in which students' life histories are examined indirectly through the teachers' perceptions, the influence of discourses may become more pronounced.

Analysis

In our analysis, we present the three dimensions of nexus analysis by moving from the broadest category, discourses, via individual life histories towards interaction orders, and finally focusing on the nexus: engaging students in school and classroom activities.

Discourses in place

In the following, we present recurring discourses that are drawn upon in the teachers' descriptions of Ukrainian students' engagement. In the Danish case, we focus on the discourse of 'good reception', including articulations of what characterises school in Denmark and thus what reception is meant to prepare the students for. In the Finnish case, inclusiveness and students' well-being are emphasised in the discourses surrounding the reception phase. Furthermore, the teachers referred to circulating discourses of trauma and liminality and the assumption that Ukrainians are 'well educated'.

The discourse of 'the good reception' emerged in various articulations in the data from Denmark. Some teachers critically described reception class as an organisational form that produces unreadiness rather than readiness for participation in Danish mainstream schooling. This critique is not unique to the case of Ukrainian newcomers; in the quote below, it is described by one teacher who was reflecting on a prior experience:

> At that time, I used to talk a lot with two colleagues, and we kind of agreed on what we think is right for these children. And that is massive language support. And then other teachers thought that they should just go and be on their own and just learn Danish and just split them up and so on. (TD2)

The teacher highlighted 'massive language support' as a central characteristic of 'good reception'. However, this is not the only emerging characteristic of 'good reception'. Across our interviews, being

placed in a reception class was also associated with words such as ‘safety’, ‘wellbeing’, no stress’, and the like. This reveals a concern about direct or premature ‘mainstreaming’ of the Ukrainian students, which is not about language competencies, but about what the teachers referred to as ‘the social aspect’ – as articulated below by TD1, who mentioned pros as well as cons of both mainstreaming and reception classes:

> I am a strong advocate for moving them into Danish mainstream classes because it could give them better social skills and maybe better language competencies, too. But at the same time, I would say that the Ukrainian classes do offer the children a possibility to be with others that have the same culture. You have the same language and the same attitudes and that may provide a better sense of safety when you just arrived in a new country. (TD1)

Thus, the discourse on ‘good reception’ was not characterised by consensus. The idea that students are best engaged in acquiring the Danish language and (school) culture by being quickly placed in mainstream classes competed with the idea that they need to experience a sense of safety and comfort based on the familiarity and low stress in the culturally more homogeneous reception class. A similar discussion was present in Finland (Alisaari et al., 2025), where the teachers furthermore referred to a common understanding of students’ possible war trauma as an argument for the importance of feeling safe.

Embedded in the concerns about ‘good reception’ and readying Ukrainian students for mainstream classes are implicit understandings of the characteristics of schools in Denmark and norms for being a ‘good student’ within it. They were implied in the teachers’ explanations of what they believed Ukrainian children lacked to display appropriate behavioural engagement in mainstream classrooms; for example, willingness to shower naked together after PE, bringing packed lunches or eating at appropriate times. On the other hand, older students’ strong emotional engagement in earning virtual medals in a math learning app was considered inappropriate for their age, as were their difficulties with group work and independent work without strong adult direction. Thus, ideas about appropriate engagement and forms of participation concerned the teachers more than Danish language skills. The teachers often referred to a different Ukrainian school culture to explain what they saw as lacking or inappropriate forms of engagement.

In the Finnish data, we saw similar discourses of well-being and a sense of safety. At all school levels, Finnish curricula emphasise students’ well-being and inclusiveness, which also entails valuing, supporting and utilising students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The discourses of building safe learning environments in a group with students from diverse cultural backgrounds circulated in some teacher interviews:

> It requires a safe atmosphere without a need to seek for shelter and build firewalls, but where one can face also different people. (TF4)

The same teacher also pointed out that the important thing when teaching such groups ‘is creating well-

being and trust that everything will go smoothly'. She highlighted the individual variation in language learning rather than setting strict learning targets, which clearly resonates with the basic idea of the curricula:

> The teacher needs to be compassionate as it comes to learning, since second language learning is an individual process and there are many factors involved. (TF4)

The Finnish teachers often referred to common discourses about the consequences of the war on individuals, and particularly the potential trauma caused by the war conditions:

> The situation of Ukrainians is certainly different, because there is a war. All the time there is war in the background. (TF3)

> Everyone has experienced something traumatic for sure. So, none of them have moved here for fun. (TF3)

The teachers recognised that the students were navigating a liminal space in which the future of their home country remained unclear. This underscored the need for secure, safe and peaceful conditions at school:

> The situation of Ukrainians is more challenging in theory, to figure out the phase of individuals, whether they stay here one month or one year or ten years or the rest of their lives? Nobody knows that. We don't know what the colour of the flag in Kiev will be in one year. For some young people it may be a way to protect oneself, to look passive, and if there is some kind of trauma behind. The backgrounds are so different. (TF3)

It is worth noting that the teachers did not talk about the actual trauma or well-being of their students but rather drew on circulating common facts and interpretations; both war and trauma were thus present at a general level and served as a repeated discursive frame for interpretations without being linked to individual students.

On the other hand, in public discourse Ukrainians have also commonly been framed as a particularly hard-working, well-educated and digitalised group of migrants. These discourses were actively circulated by teachers who had made observations that resonated with them:

> In some other groups where those who come have not had schooling in their country of origin, so in that sense this group has a very different profile. (TF4)

> If we compare to the other students, they clearly have better academic skills – and a wealth of knowledge. (TF5)

In this sense, in both the Finnish and Danish data Ukrainians are also seen as a 'well equipped' and in many ways privileged group of migrants who know how and why to study.

Historical bodies

The teachers' views of the Ukrainian students' engagement were also shaped by their perceptions of the students' backgrounds, which had been formed from students' stories and behaviour in school. Two

recurrent themes emerged in the teachers' accounts of their Ukrainian students' socialisation in Ukrainian schools: (1) academic performance and opportunities, and (2) social participation and community culture.

Apart from their levels in Danish L2, the teachers explained much of the students' academic performance as shaped by Ukrainian school. On the one hand, the teachers praised the students' discipline and their skills in some areas:

> I think they have insane discipline and they're… if it's a very concrete assignment, they are damn good, and they have achieved an amazing and impressive factual knowledge, because that is what they are used to, right? (TD2)

> They have much better math skills than Danish students. That shocked me. (TD1)

The teachers clearly understood these skills as a product of the students' schooling in Ukraine. On the other hand, however, with respect to other modes of participation they saw them as less well equipped by their Ukrainian schools. In fact, the teachers repeatedly mentioned that the Ukrainian students lacked skills in collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking:

> It may sound somewhat prejudiced, but this is the knowledge that I have, it might be different, but what I see is that they're not used to having to think about things. They're used to yes or no. And grammar is really lovely, right, because there are rules, like they have been used to. (TD2)

> It surprised me a bit [that they liked this creative task] because they are a bit like: we should read a book and write in exercise books, kind of old-fashioned teaching. (TD2)

The teachers found group work particularly challenging, and they referred to the students 'not being used to' group work or any kind of practice-oriented or playful learning activity. They drew this conclusion based on the students' behaviour in PE, where the teachers expected the students to play specific games that they were unfamiliar with.

TD1 said, 'The way we do PE in Denmark, it is structured games. In Ukraine you just throw in a bunch of stuff and they play with it. There is no structure.' This quote somehow seems to contradict the head teacher's statement that 'we have a looser hierarchical approach than in the Ukraine, where the teacher is authoritarian and expected to be very strict'. However, the issue of 'inappropriate' engagement in structured activities related to well-being (which are common in Danish schools) and activities with a combined social and academic focus was recurrent. As TD2 put it:

> I think that when we… well, it's a social thing too, when I do a class with a focus on community building and social cohesion, then I'm used to students, Danish students, they know that even if we're doing something different, it's still class and we pay attention and make the most of it. For the Ukrainian students, it's like now we're just doing something, it doesn't mean anything and we don't have to learn anything from it. I think there is a difference there. (TD2)

The teachers repeatedly mentioned that Ukrainian students had less trust in teachers, solving conflicts by

themselves without adult involvement and through fights when there were no adults around. They explained that this was because Ukrainian school are 'without breaks' (TD1) and the teachers are people that the students 'definitely don't like'.

In the Finnish data, the teachers had similar explanations for their Ukrainian students' engagement or disengagement, that is, differences in school cultures, including expected student–teacher roles: 'Certainly we have a very different culture in this school – they [the Ukrainian students] are used to being controlled and coerced' (TF1).

The interviews with TF1 and TF2 revealed some confusion about the situation, their teacher-role negotiations and the tensions between the cultures. The teachers found that the responsibility to engage lay with the students:

> I, for one, like to give them freedom to study or not to study, so it is their own decision. (TF1)
>
> And it doesn't promote their motivation, even if you try to be very strict. I, for one, feel that it would be too hard for me [the other teacher agrees] to be like that. (TF2)

Another explanation for the students' disengagement was their uncertain life situation, particularly regarding their challenges to immerse themselves in creative activities, that is, 'playfulness'. However, some teachers also viewed Ukrainian students as academically skilled and motivated learners, particularly in terms of demonstrating progress through tests:

> Their life situation probably affects language development or usage or playfulness. But I would say that everyone's language skills have developed and are developing. And they are all motivated to come [to school] and to do schoolwork and they always ask when we have tests and yes, they do want to study for the tests, and they want to prove that they learn and manage. (TF4)

According to the teacher, the emphasis on tests and performing the tasks reflects the learning culture to which students have been socialised: 'the concept of learning may be that completing the task is enough – yeah, a culture shock from this school'. She also explained that the students would find it difficult to engage in unstructured discussion activities: 'it easily happens that they only answer the questions. Please, don't just do the task because the purpose is to learn how to talk' (TF4).

The students' historical bodies that emerged from the teacher interviews across the two contexts are twofold: they are seen as academic high achievers whose behavioural engagement is slightly off in the Finnish and Danish educational settings and they are simultaneously seen as victims of war and representatives of a very strict style of schooling that the teachers can't identify themselves with.

Interaction order

In this section, we present findings regarding the final dimension of the nexus analysis: the interaction

order. In both data sets, the teacher's efforts to promote the Ukrainian students' participation by the flexible use of languages and other meaning making tools were central to classroom interaction. The teachers struggled to find pedagogically effective ways to engage the Ukrainian students in interactive activities and in some cases, they were hesitant to give emotional support, partly due to the students' assumed trauma background.

The first example of this is from the Danish fieldwork and illustrates a highly structured form of interaction between the teacher and the students:

> The researchers are standing spread out along the sides of the classroom. The teacher addresses the researchers and says, 'At the moment, we are experimenting with a new form of classroom management', and then pulls up a traffic light on the interactive whiteboard. He asks the children, 'What does the red light mean?' The children explain that only the teacher is allowed to speak when the light is red. 'And what about yellow?' the teacher asks. The children explain that the teacher is still the one speaking, but that they are now allowed to ask questions and make comments. 'What about the green one?' the teacher asks again. Now the children are allowed to talk, says a child in the back of the classroom (fieldnote).

In this extract, TD1 scaffolded the interaction firmly by enforcing a traffic-light-system that indicated who was allowed to speak, ask questions and answer questions. This practice seems to draw on the discourse of teaching the Ukrainian children how to be good students in Denmark, which includes the decoding of this signal.

The second example is from the same class. Here, TD2 introduced different activities that involved listening, reading and writing:

> The teacher shows the children the website 'danskherognu.dk' [translates to: Danish here and now.dk]. On the site, students can listen, read and write. The teacher gives instructions in English. Now, however, the children are going to listen and read at the same time – first together on the board, and afterwards individually using headsets (fieldnote).

The teacher's use of English as a medium for scaffolding the students' engagement in the activities is central to the interaction between the teacher and the students and to overcoming the language barrier. In the Danish fieldwork, the language barrier was notable, particularly in the interaction between students from Ukraine and students from Denmark. The next example is from a field conversation between the researchers and TD3 in the younger class. TD3 talked about how the students interacted with each other, despite the language barriers:

> The teacher explains that one [Danish] child had suggested a game but remarked that the others [the children from Ukraine] probably did not understand the rules; another [Danish] child then replied that they [the Danish children] could simply show them [the Ukrainian children] how to play the game. The teacher then explains to the researchers that she did not intervene and deliberately kept her distance, illustrating with her finger how she had shed a tear – figuratively speaking (fieldnote).

This example illustrates a form of interaction between the students in which bodily movement is

foregrounded as essential to meaningful interaction in the absence of a shared spoken language. However, such instances were rare, and the teachers often noted that there was limited interaction between the Danish and the Ukrainian students.

The Finnish teachers portrayed the prior language learning experiences of the Ukrainian students as central to their classroom interaction and engagement. As one teacher (TF3) noted, 'I find this to be the dilemma that if you are too critical about language proficiency, you cannot start anything'. Another teacher (TF4) described an illustrative student case:

> Super persistent so with a pencil and paper works quite actively and fills in notebook and does all homework in advance, so s/he is this kind of student, but there is a lot of uncertainty in any informal or like spontaneous speech production. (TF4)

The teachers interpreted the Ukrainian students' prior performance-oriented school culture as contributing to misunderstandings in interactional tasks intended to reduce speaking anxiety:

> When I try discussions, so that let's talk about this topic, some take it like 'these questions got answered, please give the next set of questions', so [I try to convey the idea that] let's discuss this theme broadly, just to talk - so don't just perform, we are practicing speech production. (TF3)

Lowering the barriers to classroom participation, allowing flexibility in discussion topics and encouraging students to use their mother tongue to support mutual understanding were all highlighted by the teachers. One of the teachers explicitly framed brokering or mediation (Mustonen & Puranen, 2021) as not just accepted but encouraged in classroom interaction:

> It's not that important what we discuss, if we just discuss and do it in Finnish. I always say that please help each other in your mother tongue. If someone understands what I say, just tell it to others who don't get it. The main thing is that discussion and learning go on. (TF3)

Brokers are often in a complex position: on the one hand, they carry responsibilities that belong to the teacher and which may reduce their own learning opportunities; on the other hand, the role can also be rewarding, as it can enhance the broker's self-esteem as a multilingual actor. Finnish teachers adopted diverse pedagogical approaches to support emotional engagement. Teachers with backgrounds in adult migrant education tended to maintain more distant relationships with their students.

> I don't really like to ask questions, I haven't asked anyone about why you came to Finland or other things. (TF2)

> And particularly, in the classroom, because they may not want others to hear, if it is secret, or they are afraid of the wrong people to hear. (TF1)

These teachers prioritised instruction over probing personal issues. Setting aside emotional dimensions, they focused on the young people's behavioural and cognitive engagement and often noted some students' low motivation to interact or progress in language studies, whereas others where perceived as high-performing.

> I feel like many of them have lost track of things at this time of the school year. They may not know the basic words, or they may not answer if you ask something, and get really confused. You saw in my classroom, they couldn't say a word. (TF2)

However, the teacher (TF4) with the most extensive experience in working with young migrants acknowledged the students' possible trauma backgrounds, emphasised their emotional engagement and consistently dedicated time to strengthening

> As far as group dynamics is concerned, and how well I have learnt to know them, we are still in the early stages, however, I can see myself that there is still l a lot to do, but unlike other teachers I also allow it, that we are learning to know each other and making a group little by little, because it requires safety, and the sense of safety, it takes time. (TF4)

This teacher engaged the students actively, supporting their relations and well-being, and viewed the regularity of everyday life and meaningful activities as essential. She explained that although coming to school is not mandatory, the students want to come and are trying to move on despite their harsh experiences.

Discussion: The social action of engaging students in the L2 setting

The social action at the centre of our study, engaging Ukrainian students in the L2 setting, takes place at the intersection of three intertwining dimensions: the teachers' understandings of Ukrainian students' engagement emerged at the nexus of discourses about reception practices and the special status of Ukrainians in comparison with other migrant groups; perceptions of the students' historical bodies as shaped by the Ukrainian schools system; and interaction orders in the Finnish and Danish contexts which had clearly been shaped by discourses and understandings about the goals of reception and L2 learning.

In both the Finnish and Danish cases, the teachers experienced a dissonance between their standard ways of engaging students in the classroom and unexpected student reactions, which led to some uncertainty and confusion for the teachers and the students alike. The teachers found that the Ukrainian students had high academic levels in some respects but did not engage in group work and other organisational forms in the expected ways, and they explained this behaviour by referring to their perceptions of the students' historical bodies. The teachers found that the Ukrainian students were better equipped to engage in strictly organised activities than in the forms of group work and critical thinking that are valued in Nordic schools.

As the teachers were embedded in the discourses in place, they had difficulties with identifying the values due to their implicitness and, consequently, with scaffolding the students' engagement into a more independent, critical and collaborative style. Instead, they mostly resorted to highly structured interaction orders or left it up to the students themselves to develop culturally valued modes of engagement. One

notable exception to this trend was one of the most experienced Finnish teachers, who had both the courage and the pedagogical tools to negotiate the cultural differences and engage the Ukrainian students.

Previous research from the Finnish context has suggested that some teachers may be hesitant to support the (socio-)emotional engagement of students with migrant backgrounds (Mustonen & Puranen, 2021; Mustonen et al., 2023). This is also visible in our data, although we generally observed a strong focus on the students' well-being. This is important, as student well-being and emotional engagement are generally viewed as foundational for cognitive and behavioural engagement.

In the Danish case, the focus on the students' well-being was reflected in an understanding of 'a good reception' as one that, above all, feels safe. This aligns with the long-standing Danish tradition of organising students into fixed classes throughout school, a practice historically justified by the aim of creating a small, familiar and safe unit (Coninck-Smith et al., 2015, pp. 180–183). In studies of this approach, it has been highlighted that if 'small' is to be associated with closeness, safety, homeliness and familiarity, the units must have a certain degree of cultural homogeneity (Anderson, 2000; Øland, 2007) associated with implicit norms and understandings. In our cases, we saw the circulation of such implicit norms, and it was evident that they shaped the teachers' understandings of student engagement or disengagement.

The teachers' focus on the students' well-being and their sense of safety and security may also be linked to the surrounding discourses of trauma (Theisen-Womersley, 2021) and liminality (Dziuba et al., 2025; Turner 1977). These discourses occasionally emerged in our data and were used as explanations for disengagement, as they positioned the students as passive victims (Theisen-Womersley, 2021) or short-time visitors (Kaukko, Neuhaus et al., 2026). However, research has suggested that an alternative way to approach trauma and students' uncertainty about their future would be to consider how to support their agency (see also Jepson Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021; Mustonen & Enbuska, 2025).

Our results showed that the deficit discourse about students with a forced migration background (see Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017) is not as prevailing in our data as in many other contexts. In general, the Ukrainian students were viewed as academically skilled and 'deserving', although their linguistic and cultural background was not always perceived as an asset. Nonetheless, the implicit expectations of the teachers, which recognised some forms of behavioural and emotional engagement as more appropriate than others, illustrated the persistence of cultural explanations (see Souto, 2022).

It is worth noting that the teachers were aware of some of the situational, social and cultural aspects of the students' behavioural engagement, such as a Ukrainian school culture which values different kinds of behavioural engagement, and that they were aware of possible effects of trauma on the students' emotional and cognitive engagement. Thus, they did not fall into the well-documented trap of viewing

education and learning as a neutral or de-contextualised space (see Petäjäniemi et al., 2024). Nonetheless, their perspectives tended to circulate assumptions of a homogenous 'Ukrainian' schooling culture and to emphasise cultural differences in comparison to 'Nordic' school culture. As illustrated in our analyses, this kind of stereotyping may shift the focus onto perceived shortcomings of the students, such as culturally appropriate participation, rather than to an appreciation of diversity, as pointed out in a different context by Gorski (2016).

Summing up, our findings suggest that teachers in similar Nordic contexts may potentially benefit from interculturality training to engage migrant students in inclusive ways. Becoming aware of surrounding discourses, one's own beliefs, the interaction orders and cultural norms in the classrooms and the students' orientations would support the teachers in developing a deeper understanding of diversity and the adaptive and dynamic nature of 'cultures' (see also Rissanen et al., 2023).

These findings could be applied to creating better practices for the reception of newcomers in schools, in particular with regard to intercultural competence: making the cultural norms and valued modes of engagement in the receiving society and school explicit and subjecting them to critical considerations, and engaging newcomers in culturally responsive, equal and ethical ways, taking into account not only their national culture, but also their complex identities and different ways of participating (Gorski, 2016), may lead to an improved Nordic standard of reception education.

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