

Ukrainian Children Making Music in an Irish School: A Temporary Place to Be?

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion into Ukraine in early 2022, Irish schools have a substantial number of Ukrainian children and young people attending. This article presents insights from a case study in Ireland on Ukrainian refugee children's experience of music in school. The children in this study are presented as active agents in constructing meaning and knowledge through collective musical engagement. Using creative and ethically sensitive approaches with Ukrainian children in one Irish primary school, this article examines a nine-week music project. The workshops were carried out by a Ukrainian music educator and activities aimed to facilitate a sense of belonging within the group itself, but also within the school more broadly. Data are presented in this article from sound recordings, photographs, focus group interviews, and researcher-facilitator reflective logs. The findings contribute critical insights on three main themes: identity, participation, and future imaginings. Thus, through a focussed examination of one intervention, children's direct experiences of music in schools addresses macro issues for music education and forced migration.

KEYWORDS

forced migration; Ukrainian children; refugee, belonging; musical participation; school music

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INTRODUCTION

Migratory movements into European countries are currently experiencing the highest volume in history since the Second World War. The military invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops on 24 February 2022 resulted in millions of people being forced to flee and cross borders into neighbouring countries, (such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova) as well as many who moved further west and beyond Europe. According to Eurostat¹, one third of the population of Ukraine now seeks international protection elsewhere, of which approximately 105,000 Ukrainian citizens are registered in Ireland. Migrant children (including children of International Protection applicants), refugees, and unaccompanied minors have access to free pre-school, primary, and secondary education in Ireland. With over 18,000 Ukrainian children and young people enrolled in schools across Ireland, these figures are unlike anything the country has experienced before.²

In previous studies, it has been found that newly arrived migrant children use music as a means to communicate, to form spaces of “belonging,” construct identities, and integrate with the host culture, while also employing it as a form of cultural maintenance (Karlsen, 2013; Karlsen, and Westerlund, 2010; Kenny, 2018, 2023; Marsh, 2012; Rinde and Kenny, 2021). Group music making has also been accepted as a means to provide a temporary “place to be” and opportunity for “sonic bonding” (Turino, 2008). This article explores the experiences of one group of Ukrainian children (9–11 years old) attending a primary school in Limerick city, Ireland. It is based on a case study within the larger Research Ireland-funded project, MUSPACE³, which seeks to investigate music in intercultural schools. We, the authors and researchers, are Irish (Ailbhe) and Ukrainian (Olha) women. Olha being from Ukraine also facilitated the school workshops. Specifically, this study poses the research question: how can a discrete socio-musical space for refugee children create a sense of belonging and (temporary) place to be? Within this overarching framework, the study explores further questions about how the children’s (musical) identities are negotiated within this space, the types of participation it opens up, as well as how the music-making facilitates future imaginings for the children. The article begins by examining existing literature on schools, forced migration, and belonging, before moving on to more targeted literature on how music relates to these themes. Following this, the case study methodology and findings are discussed, with analysis presented across the three themes of identity, participation, and future imaginings.

SCHOOLS, FORCED MIGRATION, AND BELONGING

Educational systems, infrastructures, and schools are typically ill-prepared for new arrivals through forced migration, responding only to a crisis as it happens and thus framing it as a “problem” (Crul *et al.*, 2019). Schools are, of course, the main space where the multiple realities of childhood, forced migration, and education intersect. Many of the explicit, subtle, and hidden barriers that forced migrant children encounter within formal education have been revealed through research in recent

¹ See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/ukraine/population-migration> (Accessed on 07 June 2024) for the most up to date figures.

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/26c5f-department-of-education-confirms-18266-ukrainian-pupils-currently-enrolled-in-irish-schools/> (Accessed on 07 June 2024).

³ See <https://muspace.hypotheses.org/> (Accessed 25 June 2025).

years. Arar *et al.* (2019) and Kenny (2022) for instance, have exposed how these children are often “othered,” segregated, and racialised. Scholars have been documenting the first experiences of newly arrived Ukrainian children in schools in Poland (Sambaraju and Shrikant, 2023; Klisowska, *et al.*, 2023; Korcz *et al.*, 2024; Śliwerski and Kossakowska, 2023), Estonia (Toros *et al.*, 2024), Lithuania (Batuchina and Ratkevičienė, 2023), and the UK (Gordon, 2023; Martin-Denham, 2022). Several of these studies report problems relating to language barriers, an inability to communicate and socialise with locals, emotional problems, and homesickness. There are also several issues pertaining to trauma and stress resulting from the war and displacement for these children, in addition to a significant shift from the traditional teaching methods that students were accustomed to in Ukrainian schools, in comparison to more active child-centred approaches (Toros *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, the ongoing impact of media exposure and news about the war in Ukraine has also been shown to affect the emotional well-being of non-migrant children in the same schools as these children (Śliwerski and Kossakowska, 2023), highlighting how far the consequences of war and forced migration in schools can spread.

It is widely accepted that the education system and schools of the host country are crucial in creating the necessary conditions for forced migrant children to feel a sense of belonging within the new society they find themselves in (Due *et al.*, 2016; Martin *et al.*, 2023; Prentice, 2022). Utilising Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory framework (1977), with its focus on interactions, Prentice (2022) points to how formal education holds great potential to support refugee children at individual, group, and systemic levels. Belonging, as a sense of feeling accepted and connected to others (Schäfer and Eerola, 2020), can create a particular sense of security, safety, and overall well-being for newly-arrived forced migrants—which is particularly important for children who have left behind familiar contexts, structures, and relationships. When seeking international protection, there is also the glaring contradiction of an imposed non-belonging (explicit through border policies and nation-state politics) with an individual’s own sense of belonging, alongside considerations of belonging to a diaspora. As such, we follow Nira Yuval-Davis’ conceptualisation of “belonging” (2006) as a dynamic process that is multi-layered, involving individual agency, but also a social negotiation of boundaries (with all its engendered constructions of inclusion and exclusion). Antonsich elaborates, “Every politics of belonging involves two opposite sides: the side that claims belonging and the side that has the power of ‘granting’ belonging” (2010, p. 650). It has been found where there is a strong sense of belonging, one can then open up spaces for creativity, risk-taking, learning, and play (Howell, 2011; Ugolotti, 2022). Music-making can form one of these such spaces.

MUSIC, BELONGING, AND IDENTITY

Thomas Turino’s writings on music as social life emphasises the dual and reciprocal nature of the social in the musical as providing a temporary “place to be” (2008, p. 187). He also writes of “sonic bonding” through collective music making, which is similar to Helen Phelan’s concept of “sung belonging” as she applies it to migrant singing within ritual spaces and places of worship (Phelan, 2017). Facilitating musical participation then can intentionally create spaces that bring people together to potentially feel a sense of belonging—even if only temporarily (Kenny, 2016, 2018; Pitts, 2005). Kathy Marsh’s (2019) research on music as dialogic space draws on her work with newly arrived forced and voluntary migrant children and young

people in Australia. She presents music making in this context as contributing to social synchrony, peacebuilding, and promoting empathy amidst situations of social uncertainty. These dialogic musical spaces, she proposes, can be created individually in an organic manner, or through more formal channels where there is a commitment to initiatives aimed at developing inclusion or conciliation.

Enge and Stige (2022) studied group singing of popular contemporary music as a form of music therapy with refugee children. An important task for the group was sourcing and agreeing on a common musical repertoire. This was seen to contribute to the development of the children's willingness to cooperate with peers. Drawing on the work of Wenger (1998), the researchers concluded that the practice of creating a shared repertoire develops children's ability to regulate emotions and engage in social interaction (Enge and Stige, 2022, p. 20). Gillian Howell's (2011) study of music making with migrant children reveals composing one's own music in collaboration with others as an important experience of socialisation. For these children, such experiences were deemed crucial for their engagement in learning and school life, for achieving some academic success, and for increasing their self-esteem, which in turn fosters hope for acquiring other skills in the future (Howell, 2011). Howell found that it is the process of composing, in particular, that enabled children over time "to feel comfortable moving from the predictable world of imitation and memorised material to the less predictable and unique world of invention, with its attendant risks and rewards" (p. 57).

Music can also play an integral role in the formation and projection of a national and/or diasporic identity (Lewis, 2010; Rice, 2013; Shelemay, 2006), with hybridisations between cultural identities and practices constantly emerging (Ong, 1999; Roberson, 2010). Migrant experiences of identity (including their musical identities) are, of course, "intersectional" (Crenshaw, 1989) and continually in flux (MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell, 2002). Studies of "homeland" music for migrant children have highlighted such complexity, where one engages with music of the country left behind as a form of cultural maintenance while also negotiating new musical cultures and genre preferences at the same time (Karlsen, 2013; Kenny, 2018, 2022; Marsh, 2012, 2019; Sæther, 2008). As was found with music-making workshops in an Irish asylum-seeking accommodation centre, "Music can come to represent a powerful form of cultural maintenance and tradition as much as it can represent hybridisation and globalisation" (Kenny, 2018, p. 11). This was also found in an examination by Kathy Marsh (2012), where newly arrived migrant girls in Australia used music and dance to traverse cultural traditions and languages as well as to connect with each other.

Through an examination of power, affect, and everyday life, Nicola de Martini Ugolotti (2022) extends Avtar Brah's understanding of diasporic spaces wherein "new forms of belonging and otherness are appropriated and contested" (Brah, 1996, p. 243). Ugolotti, in exploring the relationship between music and displacement amongst forced migrants in Bristol, points out how musical creativity is a unique lens through which to illuminate negotiations of belonging, insecurity, and marginality. Furthermore, he argues that music-making is not only a cultural symbolic signifier of ethnic, religious, or national identification for these refugees, but also a means of interweaving bodies, instruments, and sounds in a weekly musical practice — essentially an affective practice of diasporic belonging (2022, p. 103). Similarly, in researching diasporic musical spaces in Galway, it emerged that music gigs expand and transform over time through musician's practices and

interactions and are not necessarily tied into ethnic minority scenes (Kenny and Young, 2022). Thus, “a ‘diasporic’ night space becomes more than a distinctively African musical space but rather a space of encounter for Galway’s citizens” (Kenny and Young, 2022, p. 350).

METHODOLOGY

This study is the first in Ireland to explore Ukrainian children’s experience of music at school. Taking a case study approach, one primary school in Limerick city was selected by the two author-researchers within the broader MUSPACE project due to the diverse make-up of the school population. The school is a co-educational Catholic school representing 46 countries. Despite its patronage, the children attending come from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, as is the case in many Irish schools (almost 90% of publicly funded primary schools are Catholic). There are currently 22 Ukrainian children attending this school across the full range of age-groups.

Investigating the musical school life of Ukrainian children grounded the research in the “real world” (Robson, 2002). A qualitative case study approach aimed to provide distinct insights into these children’s “musical worlds” (Finnegan, 2007) through participatory methods. Fieldwork, including facilitated music workshops, started in January 2024 and lasted three months. The Ukrainian children were split into two groups of mixed age and mixed musical ability: a junior group (5–8 years old) and a senior group (9–11 years old). This article presents the results of the senior group, which involved 14 children (see Table 1). The nine participatory music workshops allowed a means of capturing data through arts-based and qualitative methods including pictures, sound recordings, interviews, a reflective log, and participant observation. The log, kept by the Ukrainian researcher-facilitator (one of the authors), provided further insights into the process and issues that arose during that time. Two focus group interviews were held with a total of 12 children who volunteered after the last few workshop sessions to stay behind. Each focus group consisted of six children aged between 9–11, with an equal split of gender in both. These interviews were audio-recorded and semi-structured in that they were guided by the research questions and themes.

Female (Alias name)	Age	Male (Alias name)	Age
Andgela	9	Juriy	9
Dasha	9	Sergey	9
Karyna	9	Eduard	9
Vera	10	Vadym	9
Maryna	10	Oleg	9
Stasya	10		
Katya	10		
Svetlana	10		
Tonya	11		

Table 1: Child participants

The music workshops delivered over nine weeks with the Ukrainian author-researcher-facilitator, created a discrete space for the newly arrived Ukrainian

children to communicate in their own language through music. Through collective musical participation, the workshops aimed to provide a socio-musical space where the children could actively construct meaning and knowledge through musical activities. The workshops involved singing, rhythmic activities, and creative tasks. The design was built around a framework that drew upon the cultural backgrounds and prior educational experiences of the students to inform their and music-making. The use of musical material from different countries as well as Ukraine aimed to address cultural stereotypes and broaden the children's musical experiences. The activities were also planned in a way to facilitate a sense of belonging and agency within the group itself but also within the school more broadly.

Ethically, the project had much to consider and went through institutional ethical approval.⁴ Following a meeting with the principal and school approval, participant information and consent sheets were provided for the parents and children in Ukrainian. A meeting with the children was called ahead of the workshops to ensure understanding and to gain assent. Validation of the researchers' interpretations was sought through building relationships with the children across three months. Music-making served both as a data collection tool and as a way of connecting with the children. The two author-researchers co-designed the work, had regular meetings to discuss the project including children's responses, improvisations, and creative tasks. Reflexivity between the researchers was crucial to the analysis, and peer debriefing techniques were employed to try to uncover the researchers' hidden preconceptions (Figg *et al.*, 2009). The themes emerged both from an inductive analysis of the data and through a process of funnelling (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Working with refugee children complicates researcher positionality (Kenny, 2021), and so the research project itself — as well as the co-authorship of this article — reflects a deliberate attempt to bring a “context-based ethical approach” to the work (Albtan *et al.*, 2022) and disrupt the obvious power imbalances. Ailbhe is white, Irish, female, and employed on a permanent basis in the country she was born in and where her co-author and children in the project seek international protection. As a white, Ukrainian female, Olha is part of the Ukrainian forced migration wave. She is currently working with Ailbhe on a temporary research contract. Olha was simultaneously negotiating a new context (both personally and professionally) alongside the children that she was working with in the school. Olha is a native of Eastern Ukraine, from a city located on the border with Russia — which becomes an important aspect of the research findings. This Irish and Ukrainian collaboration was enabled through national funding⁵ and attempts to decolonise the research process, researcher interpretations, and knowledge building, as well as address future citational practices.

This study is not without limitations. The sample size is small and the time-frame of the music project was relatively short. Despite this, meaningful relationships with the students were built by the Ukrainian author-researcher (as reflected in the data), which aided the data collection immensely. There are also limitations in only focusing on a cohort of children from Ukraine. This focus was determined by the

⁴ This project received ethical approval from MIREC (Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee).

⁵ Through the Irish Research Council Ukrainian Researcher Scheme.

existence of a research gap in this field due to the recent forced migration out of Ukraine. In addition, since the Irish education system is faced with an unprecedented increase in the number of children from Ukraine, the research focus is timely.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through the data gathered at the workshops, researcher reflective log and focus group interviews it was possible to identify three key themes for discussion: Identity, Participation, and Imagining the Future.

IDENTITY

During the first visit to the school with the group of children from Ukraine, an issue with ethnic identities arose. Olha, as researcher-facilitator, was asked immediately by the school principal if she spoke Russian. This question became more relevant when it emerged that most of the Ukrainian children in the school came from the regions of Ukraine which border with Russia. Within these regions, Russian is spoken most regularly, and half of school lessons are conducted in Russian. However, this same population, including children, understand the Ukrainian language, but some words are incomprehensible to them in terms of lexical meaning (Kulyk, 2013; Shumlianskyi, 2006; Riabchuk, 2019). Kulyk (2013) argues that people's linguistic and cultural attitudes depend not only on their communicative practices, but also on their identification with a particular language or languages, even if they are not always able to communicate in that language. Hence, a type of "hybridity" that is often associated within postcolonial states was evident here (Bhabha, 1990). This hybridity, in turn, extends with the confluence of the English language spoken within the Irish school (also a postcolonial context) for these Ukrainian children.

The music workshops themselves utilised several languages, namely, Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Examples of how this worked in practice involved: discussing a composer in Ukrainian; responding to music in Ukrainian or Russian; and switching to English when the school principal or a teacher entered the room. Thus, the children and the facilitator were engaged in a phenomenon described as "translanguaging" (García, 2009; García and Wei, 2014), where children employ several languages depending on the communication system required. Such a finding echoes a previous study describing music workshops with children in asylum seeking centres in Ireland (Kenny, 2018).

The songs shared within the workshops also shed light on such hybrid identities and the role of language. Songs were sung by the children in both Ukrainian and English. The children who had attended schools where Russian was spoken in the past had very few Ukrainian songs in their repertoire. However, under the conditions of forced migration, these same children sang Ukrainian songs enthusiastically, demonstrating the effects of widespread support for their homeland in a time of war. This demonstrable patriotism among the children from different regions of Ukraine was particularly strong when they learned the song *Ой, у лузі червона калина/Oh, in the Meadow is a Red Viburnum* (written by Stefan Charnetsky)⁶ as revealed in a researcher log entry:

⁶ Anthem of the Sich Riflemen (Ukrainian legion within the Austro-Hungarian army)

Showed the children the song Ой, у лузі червона калина/Oh, in the Meadow is a *Red Viburnum*, which they know well, but only the first verse. The children were very surprised that this song was written 110 years ago and has an important historical significance in the history of the Ukrainian people's struggle for independence. I offered them to listen to it in another performance (by a military choir) under the video of historical events. It made a strong impression on the students (Log 3 _17.02.2024).

As previous research has shown, music can be an important means of transmitting historical consciousness from one generation to another while also maintaining contact with the culture of the home country (Boura, 2006; Gross *et al.*, 1994; Klein, 2005; Lewis, 2010; Roberson, 2010). The children's growing interest in their national culture and traditions testify to their awareness and heightened sense of belonging to the state of Ukraine within the context of forced migration.

As highlighted in research conducted in Ireland on the socio-educational integration of migrant children (Horgan *et al.*, 2022), language is a key area contributing to a sense of belonging in a new school and host country. Hence, the music workshops involved learning Ukrainian songs with some verses translated into English (Audio Clip 1):

([Audio Clip 1](#): The children sing Ukrainian song *Hey, Hey, Rise Up!* in English)

The next stage of the workshop was to work on the correct intonation of the melody of the song *Hey, Hey, Rise Up!* and to learn the words of verse two in English. This work was done in duets, trios, and collectively. Some difficulties in the performance are connected with the necessity of singing clearly the English words to a melody already known to the children. The process of learning the song in English takes more time. Watching the children as they sang and their accompanying Irish teacher's assistant, one could see and hear the children's pride. It was as if they were explaining some history about Ukraine, making themselves more relatable to the teacher, as if they were revealing themselves (Log 5 _25.01.2024).

Observations of the children at break time revealed that the Ukrainian children who spoke English well, had Irish friends who would escort them to the door before the music workshops. It has been found that acquiring the language of the host country, which helps children to connect with their peers and increases their chances of academic and social success, gives children confidence, the opportunity to receive a quality education, and the hope of being able to plan for their future (Horgan *et al.*, 2022). This was also evidenced in the focus group interview where one of the girls, Katya (10 years old), said:

I feel comfortable in Irish school both in lessons and in communicating with Irish classmates, because at home, in Ukraine, I had a lot of English tutors and now for me it is not difficult to understand teachers and my foreign peers.

during the First World War). In 2022, the song gained a new wave of popularity when the band Pink Floyd released a cover version called "Hey, Hey, Rise Up!" featuring Andriy Khlyvnyuk of BoomBox.

However, not all Ukrainian children had this experience. For example, Karyna (9 years old) shared, “I don’t feel very comfortable in the Irish school because I don’t understand and speak English very well.”

In relation to exploring personal identity, one of the workshop activities built a network in the form of a spider’s web.

The next task was to identify their mood over the last week and associate it with a particular character of music. The children took turns to make their statements using bright green knitting yarn. After making their statement, the children threw a ball of yarn to the classmate opposite them ... the children gave characteristics such as thoughtful, happy, normal, laughing, and gave musical characteristics of their moods. This pleased me. At the end, the children saw an interesting drawing made with green thread, similar to a spider’s web (see figure 1). We concluded that we all have different moods, but when we are in the same room we should respect each other’s feelings and be patient (Log 3 _17.02.2024).

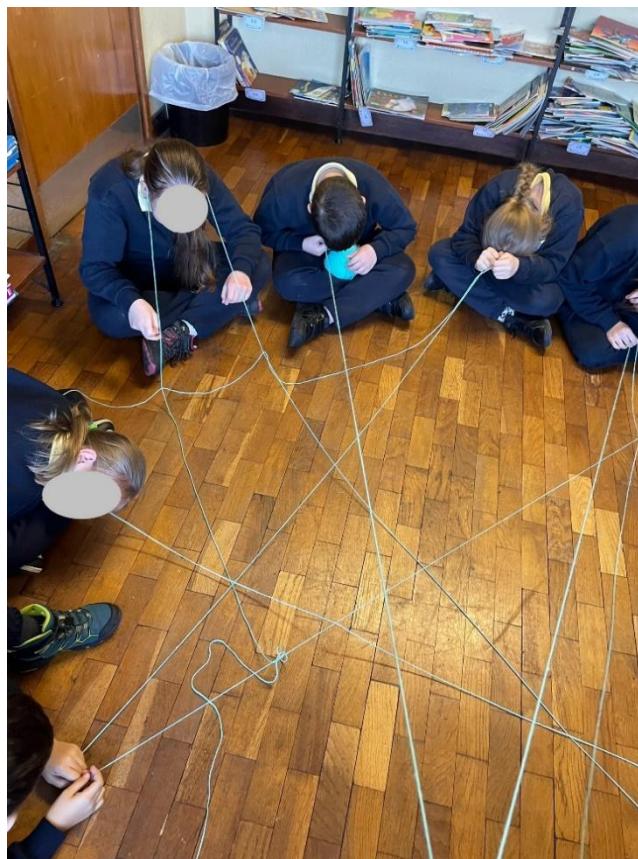


Figure 1. Spider’s web activity. Photo by Olha Lukianchenko.

Most of the children said that their mood was positive or normal, while a brother and sister said that their mood was worse than usual (this sibling pair came from one of the worst affected areas of war). The children’s responses were striking in their willingness to express their personal feelings openly and publicly, which demonstrated a particular trust in each other and in a Ukrainian music facilitator.

Recognising individual uniqueness was facilitated by a musical activity, which involved singing each child’s name:

The class started with singing, so we learned each other's names and got to know the new girl in our group. The children really enjoy this singing exercise as I have built the singing process around singing their names. They are very happy to sing their names, especially the boys who were used to being addressed more rudely or by their surname. One boy was very sensitive to singing his name as he struggles with speech and language generally, but he sings quite well and with great enthusiasm. The teacher's assistant for this boy watched the children's and my work with curiosity and actively sang the students' names. This was pleasing (Log 5_25.01.2024).

This example from the reflective log illustrates how the music workshops were used to build self-awareness and negotiate multiple identities. This musical activity with the children's names played a key role in this process, especially as their names are unusual in an Irish context. It has been found that a person's name is the most important anchor of self-identity throughout life (Florescu, 2023). When a name is mispronounced or misspelled, for instance, it can be seen as a distortion of an identity (Aksholakova, 2013, p. 468). Understanding belonging to a particular group begins with understanding the unique ethnic connotations of their name (Khosravi, 2012, p. 65). Valerie Alia (2007) argues that names are not just a label but an important site for creating boundaries of belonging and can facilitate or complicate individual or group relationships and the ability to integrate into society.

PARTICIPATION

Each music workshop involved the active participation of every child through diverse types of musical activities such as rhythmic tasks, singing, or playing a handheld instrument. Collective music-making in small groups was mentioned by the children in the focus group interviews as something they really liked about the workshops. Maryna (10 years old) claimed, "I really like the music workshops, I can make music myself here", and Tonya relayed: "Here we can be ourselves, participate in everything individually." This active involvement and fostering of child agency were a distinctive feature of some of the composing/improvisation work, such as this soundscape example ([Audio Clip 2](#)).

The emphasis on active participation, particularly through music, is illustrated by extracts from the reflective log:

Vadym, Sergey, and Stasya said that in our workshops they all, without exception, have the opportunity to express themselves, to try playing musical instruments, to sing in different groups, not just in a choir. Maksim remarked that in regular lessons in the Irish school he usually sits quietly without participating because he does not succeed right away and the teacher asks him not to interfere and just to watch what the other students are doing. Karyna, Dasha, and Andgela said that it was very important for them to be taught in the language they have known and understood since birth (Log 18_21.03.2024).

Thus, the participatory music activities were not so much about making music but were used as a way for the children to communicate and bond in this specific "diasporic space" (Ugolotti, 2022). Some activities were aimed at this, such as the one described here:

Standing in a circle with their hands up to their neighbours, the children clapped their neighbours' hands to greet and complement each other. It was

unusual for them to do this. To mark every positive detail in each other. But it was obviously nice for them to hear something good coming their way (Log7_1.02.2024).

This activity facilitated the children to look closely at each other, and they were encouraged to see something distinctive to the person. This resonates with previous studies where socio-musical activities can help to reduce the isolation and disorientation of displacement and build connections (Kenny, 2023). Thus, the music making in this diasporic but also dialogic space resulted in co-created shared meanings (Marsh, 2019).

Various musical activities were designed to facilitate a sense of belonging and agency amongst the children. Turino (2008) claims, “moving and sounding together in a group creates an immediate sense of being together and a deep similarity and therefore identity between the participants” (p. 34). The workshops involved the pupils in collective musical and rhythmic activities which embodied elements of Dalcroze’s (1921) and Orff’s (1950) ideas to recognise and embody the rhythm of a piece of music through improvised movement (see figure 2). Through listening excerpts, the children moved freely in a circle and reflected changes in the music with their bodies. This provoked different reactions from the children — from embarrassment, confusion, and laughter to artistic movements. With each workshop, the children’s movements became more refined, as reflected here:

The workshop started with moving in a circle to the music of the “Dance of the Dragee” from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker ballet. Before listening, we discussed who likes sweets, how they would imagine the dance of the little round sweets and started to move to the music. The children’s movements were different, each moving as they felt the music. The girls were more inspired, moving with ease on their fingertips, spinning, making some jerky movements with their hands. Some of the boys did not like this task, they moved without much desire, looking at the other pupils and at me. We then discussed the importance of rhythm in music. What is the difference between pulse and rhythm? What is the pulse of the human body? (Log 7_1.02.2024)

As revealed, gender differences emerged most likely due to embedded gendered norms about bodily movement amongst the Ukrainian children. As these types of activities became more habitual for the children, these gendered responses eased. For instance, the children began to join together or to dance individually in their own distinctive style. When in pairs, however, gender differences emerged again. There were also clear gender differences in musical preferences stated at the interview. For example, girls’ responses show a preference for hip-hop, particularly music related to K-pop culture, with artists such as Stray Kids, NewJeans and BlackPink cited. Boys showed a preference for music from the computer game Minecraft, which is associated with the ambient electronic genre.



Figure 2. Responding to Music in the Free Movements. Photo by Olha Lukianchenko.

In the context of participatory music making, one musical-rhythmic task described in this log entry demonstrates the type of collective responsibility encouraged:

The children sat on the floor in a circle and listened attentively to the music, clapping in time on their knees and on the floor with a paper cup, moving it to a neighbour and emphasising the strongest part of each bar. In this way, each pupil moved their cup and at the same time extracted a sound to the rhythm of the piece of music. The pupils were very interested in this task. It required concentration of attention, coordination of movements, matching the rhythm of the piece of music, and helped the children to feel the sense of ensemble performance. It was great! This task is a preparatory stage for the children to create their own rhythmic pattern and the ability to demonstrate and communicate it to others (Log 7 _1.02.2024).

While a coherent sound was not obtained the first time, the children did not show any dissatisfaction or aggression towards the children who, with awkward movements, broke the general rhythm and disrupted the performance. After some practice, a coherent sound was achieved and the children expressed delight and pride at how well they had worked together. The children consistently asked to repeat this musical activity. This was also mentioned by the children in the focus group interviews when asked what they liked most about the music workshops: “I really liked making sounds with a paper cup, I thought it would be so easy, but when we did it all together to music it turned out that it wasn’t quite like that. We had to be very attentive, listen to the music, and pass the rhythm on to each other” (Natasha, 10 years old) (see figure 3). This revealed an emerging “community of

musical practice” with attendant rules, roles, identities, and ways of being, where the children engaged in a collective process that was both musical and social, in which relationships, a sense of belonging and collaboration were central to the activity (Kenny, 2016).



Figure 3. Collective task. Photo by Olha Lukianchenko.

As Marsh (2019) has pointed out, the inherent sociality of musical play, and the way in which its kinaesthetic and rhythmic attributes evoke a sense of group cohesion, illustrates what Turino (2008) calls “social synchrony,” which entails a sense of social comfort, belonging, and identity. According to Turino, this is linked to “participatory performance,” with participants each contributing differing levels of skill and musical experience. For example, during the music workshops, the children were asked to create their own original rhythmic pattern and clap it in pairs, standing back-to-back. The partner had to repeat what they heard in their own performance of the task:

The children paired up as they felt comfortable doing. Mostly girls with girls and boys with boys. It was very interesting to watch the minute when each child’s imagination created its own rhythm. The children’s eyes became penetrating, there was a certain concentration of attention, and a mysterious atmosphere of creation. It was also very important for the children to demonstrate their rhythm clearly, without speeding up. So that the person behind them could repeat it. This task aroused great interest and response from the children (Log 9_8.02.24).

As a result of this activity, the children created “rhythmic duets” where, on the one hand, the children were stimulated to create and, on the other, they became aware of the importance of being able to communicate and listen to others (see figure 4). Thus, this dialogic space (Marsh, 2019), created through musical interaction, potentially fostered the development of empathy, a sense of belonging, and ‘sonic bonding’ (Turino, 2008).



Figure 4 Making rhythms back-to-back. Photo by Olha Lukianchenko.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

In an ethnographic study with refugee musicians in Greece, Chrysi Kyratsou (2023) found that, “music fosters imaginations of possible belongings” (p.13). Turino (2008), in his writings on the potential of participatory music-making, also speaks to the opportunities for alternative social futures imagined through collective musical engagement. Within the workshops, the Ukrainian children were invited to dream, to imagine their future, and to try and express it in musical terms. To begin this work, songs were used where the lyrics focussed on dreams, resilience and hope in the face of adversity (for example songs from the 2023 film *Wonka*). Moving on from this, the children were asked to create a short fairy tale about an unusual, fantastic spring in the future in small groups, and then compose music to the tale. As this log entry describes:

The children had to take turns saying their word or phrase, creating a fairy tale [...] I wrote down their statements and suggested that they sound out the story using musical instruments. Initially, the pupils’ statements were quite simplistic and only a few children came up with something mysterious and magical. The creation of musical accompaniment to spring stories was more original, imitating phenomena in nature (Log 11_22.02.2024).

Such an approach takes on ideas from Paulo Freire’s (1994) and bell hooks’ (2003) work, which call for a pedagogy of hope as a central imperative for an emancipatory education. In a classroom, this might be conceived as facilitating a space for creativity and critical thinking. Here is one example from the children’s spring stories:

The animals woke up
The ice melted
The flowers grew
The wind blew hard
The trees turned green

The birds came

They started to build nests! (Log11_ 22.02.24)

In [Audio Clip 3](#), we hear Oleg talk about his imagined future in the Netherlands, where many of his best friends are now. This leads to a musical improvisation. During such creative musical activities, the children were observed as fully immersed in and enjoying the process, or of being in “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997). Through such immersive music-making tasks, the children were also creating a sense of community, thus extending the activity to share with the others in the class and reviewing each other’s creative outputs regularly.

Josh Kun’s (2005) views on migration as a sonic process is interesting to consider in light of these findings. Kun proposes “audiotopias” where music can create a temporarily inhabited quasi-utopia or, “the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world” (p. 23). These musical activities then are not just about imagining the future but are also about learning to live in the present world. To illuminate these ideas, there were some conversations with the children about how they stay connected with Ukraine while in Ireland. It emerged that five out of 11 children attend an online school in Ukraine on top of their Irish school attendance. When asked about Ukrainian friends they are now separated from, six out of 11 children indicated they are in permanent contact via telephone chat apps or phone calls. The interviews also revealed homesickness, longing, and anxiety for relatives and friends who stayed in Ukraine. The children also spoke of how music functions as a mechanism to cope with and express these emotions. For example, Karina shared, “Sometimes I miss Ukraine very much, I feel sad and want to cry. Then I find my favourite songs by Ukrainian singers on YouTube and listen to them quietly and cry.” Another girl, Vera, claimed, “When I feel sad, my mum and I dance to our Ukrainian music.”

Facilitating the children to imagine a future in the music workshops, Shank’s (2016) ideas that imagination is also a conduit for identity formation and divergent thinking came to the fore:

Interestingly, most of the children did not describe their future in terms of specific imaginary events, but rather in terms of their emotional state and mood in the future. For example, girls said they would be successful, happy, beautiful, and kind. A pair of children (brother and sister) spoke about peace in Ukraine, describing their feelings as dark and sad at first, but expressing confidence that light would come later (Log17__14.03.2024).

The above excerpt recalls some of Freire’s (2003) last writings about a pedagogy of hope when he pens, “It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite” (p. 106). Overwhelmingly, the Ukrainian children believed in a positive, bright future and a return to Ukraine after the war.

CONCLUSION

It is now widely accepted that people (including children) are active agents in constructing meaning, knowledge, and identities from musical experiences (Elliott, Silverman and Bowman, 2016; Karlsen and Westerlund 2010; Kenny, 2016). This study highlights the importance and relevance of creative and collective musical practices for refugee children in mainstream school settings, particularly as the

number of forcibly displaced people continues to rise. The use of musical improvisation and composition by the children emerged as a most effective way for them to work towards imagining their futures. Being given the freedom to imagine in this way—in a creative space, free from linguistic barriers—proved to open up opportunities to envision alternative realities and potential pathways, thereby instilling hope in the children.

Creating socio-musical spaces in school through highly participatory music-making activities, or through fostering a “community of musical practice” (Kenny, 2016) appeared to provide a temporary place for these children to be in their new cultural and social context, as well as mitigating feelings of homesickness and sadness. The findings suggest that through their musical participation with a Ukrainian facilitator, the children responded to opportunities to express their national identity and maintain cultural connections but also simultaneously seek ways to create new connections, build new knowledge, and explore new possibilities. This aspect aligns with previous research, which suggests that the role of collaborative musical activities in specific “diasporic spaces” is not only to make music but also to provide spaces to communicate and connect (Ugolotti, 2022).

The study has shown the necessity for well-designed, discrete supports for these children, with an emphasis on creative modes of expression that foster a sense of belonging and community, as well as a means to imagine possible, hopeful futures. However, the sense of belonging for the children of this study was complicated and multi-layered (Yuval-Davis, 2006). On one hand, the children formed close bonds to each other as a group of forcibly displaced Ukrainian children. However, this also separated them from the rest of the school, potentially “othering” the children further in this context. This resonates with Yuval-Davis’ writings on the “politics of belonging,” involving a delineation of boundaries between an “us” and “them.” The sense of belonging fostered amongst these children through the music workshops is therefore neither clear cut nor presented as a success story. As Hardy and Kallio warn, “It is difficult to disagree with a desire to belong, or to foster belonging in and through music education, yet the pathways to social inclusion are not always linear nor wholly ‘good’” (2023, p. 84). What is clear from the study is that music education in schools needs to attend to the challenges and opportunities that forced migration brings with it. There is much to be done yet.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research forms parts of the MUSPACE project which is funded by a Research Ireland Laureate Award (2022–26). The research is further supported by the Ukrainian Researcher Scheme (2023–24), funded by Research Ireland.

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