Holistic Development through Physical Education: Curriculum Comparisons between Ukraine, Austria, and Great Britain

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Abstract
This paper explores how cultural and philosophical differences in physical education (PE) systems shape the integration experiences of Ukrainian refugee teachers and students in Western European educational contexts. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Ukrainian PE teachers who fled to Austria and Great Britain, as well as a content analysis of national PE curricula, the study identifies key divergences between performance-oriented and participation-oriented pedagogical models. Ukrainian PE traditions emphasize structure, discipline, and measurable achievement, whereas Western European approaches prioritize inclusivity, individualization, and holistic development. These differences result in both challenges and opportunities during educational transitions, impacting professional identity, student engagement, and pedagogical adaptation. The findings are interpreted through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy and the concept of "pedagogical border crossing," highlighting the need for adaptive professional development and inclusive curriculum design. The study supports existing research (e.g., Azzarito et al., 2017; Hardman, 2008) and extends it by offering grounded insights from refugee educators navigating new educational environments. It concludes by emphasizing the integrative potential of physical education when it balances high expectations with cultural sensitivity and equity. Recommendations for future research include incorporating student perspectives and conducting longitudinal studies to track integration over time.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, physical education, curricula comparison, integration

1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a large-scale invasion of Ukraine after officially recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This conflict, like all wars, has led to severe humanitarian crises, affecting millions of lives. The impact of war extends beyond the immediate violence, causing widespread depression, disease, and suffering among the affected populations. Neighboring and distant countries often witness these crises through media coverage, particularly stories of people fleeing their homes.

The recent European refugee crisis, which began in 2015, saw a significant influx of migrants from war-torn countries such as Syria and Afghanistan (Austrian Ministry of Interior, 2021). Many of these migrants traveled with their families, but a growing number (nine percent) arrived in Austria alone, without parents or close relatives, and are classified as "unaccompanied minor refugees" (UMF[1]) (Austrian Ministry of Interior, 2021).

Despite the differing causes of migration in previous years compared to the current conflict in Ukraine, the pattern of mass displacement within Europe continues. As of early 2025, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has verified over 12,600 civilian deaths in Ukraine. Additionally, nearly 6.8 million people have fled Ukraine, with neighboring Poland recording the highest number of border crossings, followed by Hungary, Romania, and Russia. A significant portion of those fleeing the Russian invasion are women and children, as most Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 are required to stay and serve in the military (CNN, 2022).

The migrant population arriving from Ukraine is highly heterogeneous, encompassing a broad spectrum of educational backgrounds, prior schooling experiences, literacy levels, and language proficiencies. A significant proportion of these individuals are children and adolescents of compulsory school age, echoing trends observed during previous waves of forced migration to Europe (Puschautz, Dauer, & Hager, 2022; Blossfeld et al., 2016; Burmann & Mutz, 2016). These young refugees often arrive with disrupted educational biographies and may be affected by war-related trauma, which can further complicate their adaptation to new school environments (Günther et al., 2023; Niedrig & Rödel, 2022).

Since 2015, Austria—like many other European countries—has experienced a sustained increase in the number of displaced persons entering the national education system, most of whom are legally obliged to attend school (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds [ÖIF], 2018). This demographic shift presents substantial challenges for the Austrian school system, which must address not only linguistic and curricular integration, but also the psychosocial needs of learners with potentially traumatic migration experiences (Hess & Pfeiffer, 2023; Bruneforth et al., 2022). These integration demands are particularly acute in schools with limited institutional resources and insufficiently prepared staff, underscoring the need for inclusive pedagogical strategies and systemic support mechanisms.

Efforts to integrate displaced people into educational institutions are ongoing. Physical education and sports programs are often seen as effective means of integrating vulnerable individuals (Australian Sports Commission, 2006; Tiemann, 2013; Tiemann, 2015). The integration of newly arrived students from Ukraine is crucial in other subjects as well, and the

[1] This abbreviation stands for “Unbegleiteter minderjähriger Flüchtling” and means unaccompanied minor refugee.

knowledge they acquired in their previous schools may be particularly relevant for teachers in the host country. Therefore, understanding the general education system, its structure, and the subjects taught in Ukraine can facilitate the integration process for Ukrainian students.

1.1 **Structure of the Ukrainian School system**

The Ukrainian education system is organized into four main stages, beginning with pre-primary education. This stage includes nursery schools, known as 'dytyachi yasla,' which cater to infants and toddlers from six weeks to three years old, and kindergartens, referred to as 'dytyachi sadki,' designed for children aged three to six years (Education encyclopedia, 2022).

Following pre-primary education, children enter elementary school, which spans four years. This period is divided into grade one (ages six to seven) and grade two (ages eight to nine). At the end of grade four, students take exams in Ukrainian language, mathematics, and reading

Middle school follows, covering ages ten to fourteen, with a curriculum that includes Ukrainian language and literature, foreign languages, sciences (mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics), history, music, art, and sports. Upon completing grade nine, students receive a state certificate after passing state examinations.
The final stage of the Ukrainian educational system is upper secondary education, which begins at age fifteen and lasts three years. Students can choose between the "academic stream," which prepares them for university or other higher education institutions offering bachelor's degrees, and the "vocational stream," which focuses on specialized education. In both streams, students must select three mandatory subjects for state examinations: Ukrainian language and literature, mathematics or Ukrainian history, and a third subject of their choice (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022).

Recent developments in Ukraine's education sector have been significant despite the ongoing conflict. As of early 2025, the Ukrainian government has continued the New Ukrainian School (NUS) reform, which started in 2017, to modernize education in grades 1-12 and align it with EU standards. This reform emphasizes a curriculum focused on 21st-century skills, continuous professional development for teachers, and modernized education management. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine regularly reviews policies, statistics, and achievements in the education sector, providing valuable insights into the current state of education.

The standard educational program of primary education outlines the recommended approaches to the planning and organization of educational components by a primary education institution for students to achieve obligatory learning goals defined by the standards for primary education in Ukraine. In the course of the Ukrainian primary school curriculum one can find information about typical educational programs which – according to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (2022, p.1) - are defined by:

✓ the total volume of the educational load and the expected learning outcomes of education seekers, submitted within the framework of educational branches;

✓ the list and proposed content of educational fields, arranged according to content lines;

✓ approximate duration and possible interrelationships of educational fields, subjects, disciplines, etc., including their integration, as well as the logical sequence of their study;

✓ recommended forms of organization of the educational process and tools of the system of internal quality assurance of education; requirements for persons who can start studying under this program.

Both educational curriculum programs (grade 1 and 2 as well as grade 3 and 4) propose a list focusing on mandatory educational fields which will be mentioned subsequently (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022, p.3):

✓ Linguistic and literacy, in particular: the Ukrainian language, languages of indigenous peoples and of national minorities, literature; foreign language education
✓ Mathematics
✓ Natural sciences
✓ (general) technology
✓ Information technology
✓ Social and health care science
✓ Civil and historical science
✓ Artistic science
✓ Physical education

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Study design

This study aims to thoroughly examine the Ukrainian primary school curriculum. While many Ukrainian upper secondary students have access to well-established distance learning tools and programs (Austrian Ministry of Education, 2022b), this paper focuses on younger students at the elementary school level. Specifically, the Ukrainian primary school curriculum has been analyzed in terms of content, learning methods and techniques, and assessment and evaluation strategies. Subsequently, the study highlights the similarities and differences compared to the Austrian and British primary school curriculum.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has led to a severe humanitarian crisis, forcing countless individuals and families to flee their homeland and seek protection in various European nations. Key drivers of this displacement include the direct consequences of warfare, widespread violations of human rights, and threats to individual security. This mass movement has notably influenced countries such as Germany (999,745), the United Kingdom (210,800), and Austria (104,990), all of which have received substantial numbers of Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR, 2023). However, arrival in a host country marks only the beginning of a complex process of adaptation. Refugees frequently encounter significant obstacles, including difficulties with language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and mental health challenges. Given their sizable Ukrainian populations and differing national responses to refugee support, these three countries were selected for closer examination. Germany is characterized by its extensive integration infrastructure, the United Kingdom is distinguished by its multicultural environment, and Austria presents a distinctive socio-political framework. Together, they offer a comparative perspective on integration practices and outcomes. Although existing scholarship has largely concentrated on refugees' involvement in sports clubs (e.g., Spaaij et al., 2019; Dukic et al., 2017) and the role of football as a medium for

belonging, the present study expands the focus. It explores how sports more broadly can function as a vehicle for fostering social cohesion within host societies. Thus, the differences in PE curricula result in both challenges and opportunities during educational transitions, impacting professional identity, student engagement, and pedagogical adaptation.

The study's design primarily involves content analysis (Mayring, 2017; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022), encompassing the primary school curricula of Ukraine, Austria and Great Britain, alongside documents published by governmental organizations, primarily the educational ministries of the three countries. Patterns identified between individual codes revealed major themes, which can be derived from the aforementioned curricula and existing literature (i.e. deductive coding), or through in-vivo (i.e. inductive) coding, using terms for concepts that emerge from the data itself, a method also applied in educational ethnographies […] (Saldana, 2016, p. 106).

Following an initial cycle of separate analysis of the three national curricula with a strong focus on the subject physical education (sections 3.1), the study includes a section focusing on the similarities and differences in each of the curricula (section 3.2). Likewise, the same section embraces both a section on qualitative and quantitative methods applied in the study (cf. section 2.3). The paper concludes with future goals, measurements, and further challenges (section 5).

2.2 Participants

Due to the significant vulnerability of Ukrainian war refugees, interviews were conducted only after obtaining consent from the participants. It was a prerequisite for all participants to possess prior teaching experience in physical education within Ukraine. Comprehensive information about the research project was provided beforehand, including details about the interview process and assurances that only anonymized data from the interviews would be used in the publication. After obtaining consent, a second researcher reviewed the interview questionnaire to enhance data reliability.

The following table (Table 1) presents an overview of the participating refugees. The researcher aimed to include Ukrainian refugees of various ages, different levels of teaching experience, diverse geographical origins within Ukraine, and different countries of residence after their successful escape. This approach ensures the greatest possible diversity of insights into interactions with Ukrainian (adolescent) refugees. Subsequent representatives of Ukrainian refugees - all of them being teachers for physical education in Ukraine for a couple of years - were interviewed:

Table 1: *Sampling of study participants*

Name (sex)	Age	Teaching experience [years]	Ukrainian region of origin	Target country
Dmytro	42	15	Kharkiv	Austria
Natalia	38	12	Kiev	Great Britain
Olena	34	10	Lviv	Austria
Victor	48	15	Dnipro	Great Britain
Maksym	32	6	Melitopol	Austria

2.3 Methods

Given the presence of inherent social hierarchies within educational environments such as school classrooms (Lofland et al., 2006), this study adopted a dual-method research design, as outlined earlier in section 2.1. To capture a broad and nuanced understanding of educational integration in the context of forced migration, a mixed-methods strategy was employed, combining individual interviews with a qualitative content analysis.

The interviews were conducted with Ukrainian sports teachers who had fled to Austria and Great Britain. These participants, through their lived experiences in both their country of origin and their respective host countries, were uniquely positioned to draw meaningful comparisons between the physical education systems of Ukraine and those in Western Europe. As Patton (2003) emphasizes, interviews yield rich, valid, and reliable data about people's perceptions, experiences, and beliefs—particularly when exploring phenomena shaped by displacement and cultural transition.

In parallel, a qualitative content analysis following Mayring's (2015; 2017) and Kuckartz & Rädiker's (2022) methodological framework was applied to systematically examine the national physical education curricula of Austria, Great Britain, and Ukraine. This analysis focused on identifying how key educational dimensions—such as health promotion, motor skill development, inclusion, and social competence—are framed and prioritized in the official policy documents of each country. As Bihu (2021) notes, content analysis offers a valuable tool for uncovering how societal values are embedded within educational representations.

Together, these methodological approaches enabled a comprehensive examination of the interplay between educational policy and practitioner experience, revealing how structural differences in curricula intersect with the realities of refugee teachers adapting to new pedagogical landscapes.

Interviews with Ukrainian refugees residing in Austria were conducted as 'face-to-face interviews' (Cassell & Symon, 2004), while those with refugees in Great Britain were held online.[2] Establishing contact with Ukrainian refugees was regarded extremely difficult in the beginning; however, according to the saying 'one step at a time', access to Ukrainian refugees, who were eager to share their opinions and draw comparisons between their host and home country, became easier.

2.4 *Data analysis*

As highlighted earlier, investigating this field requires a distinct approach to delve into the multifaceted aspects of integration encountered by Ukrainian adolescent war refugees. Although there are shared experiences among refugees in a host nation, it is overly reductive to generalize based on a single attribute, such as nationality or a specific trait (e.g., disability). The researcher advocates for a more sophisticated and comprehensive discourse that transcends the simplistic binary of 'inclusive-exclusive' frameworks (Dobson, 2004).

[2] All interviews were conducted in English, as the interviewees' proficiency in the language was deemed sufficient for expressing their opinions and thoughts.

The comprehensive interview methodology provided nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives, beliefs, and emotional responses. Through a combination of structured and exploratory questioning techniques, the investigator could delve into multifaceted aspects of the research topic, uncovering intricate details that alternative data collection approaches might overlook. Interview recordings were meticulously transcribed to maintain precision and coherence. Prior to analysis, all participant identifiers were removed to ensure confidentiality, and the resulting data underwent systematic content analysis following established frameworks (Mayring, 2022; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

Prior research examining refugee experiences and associated phenomena such as forced migration, psychological trauma, and adaptive mechanisms was systematically reviewed, drawing from established qualitative investigations (Agrusti & Damiani, 2019; Kölbel, 2022; Berry, 1997; Silove et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the predominant analytical framework emerged through an inductive approach, with thematic categories developing organically from the empirical material using MAXQDA 2022 software. To strengthen methodological rigor and ensure findings' dependability, multiple coding validation procedures were implemented, including inter-rater agreement assessments and peer debriefing protocols (Kaiser, 2021; Helfferich, 2011; Flick, 2007; Lüders, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 2 should clarify the applied coding procedure:

Table 2: *Data extract and equivalent code*

Data extract	Coded theme
In Ukraine, physical education is a very structured and respected part of the curriculum. We follow a national program that emphasizes motor development, physical fitness, and moral values like sportsmanship and teamwork *The Ukrainian system produces teenagers who are physically capable and mentally tough. We have clear progression standards for strength, endurance, speed, and agility.*	1. Motor skills 2. Health
In Austria, the system feels more relaxed and child-centered. There is more emphasis on enjoyment, participation, and promoting social skills through movement	3. Social competences

To assess the consistency of coding among researchers, Cohen's Kappa was used as a measure of inter-coder reliability. Cohen's Kappa evaluates the level of agreement between coders while accounting for the agreement that could occur by chance. Values for Kappa range from -1 to 1, where higher values indicate stronger agreement.

3. Results

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative analysis of interviews (N=5) with quantitative content analysis (Mayring, 2017) of educational curricula - focusing on the subject physical education - from Austria, Ukraine, and Great Britain. A thorough analysis of the three aforementioned curricula revealed four main themes: health (promotion), motor skills (development), social competences and inclusion. While the first two themes (i.e. health and motor skills) could be directly discerned, the latter two themes (i.e. social competences and inclusion) could only be indirectly traced. The (British) national curriculum (Department for Education, 2013), for instance, states: "Opportunities to compete in sport and other activities build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect."
The following subsections delineate these themes, supported by notable quotations encapsulating common perspectives among interviewees. It is important to note that the citations provided herein serve as representative narratives reflecting shared experiences rather than individual opinions (Dahlin-Ivanoff & Holmgren, 2017). The complementary quantitative content analysis of national curricula provided structural context for understanding how these themes manifest within formal educational frameworks across the three countries.

3.1 The role of physical education across curricula

In Ukraine, physical education is an essential part of the primary school curriculum. The curriculum aims to promote physical development, health, and fitness among students. Activities include running, jumping, throwing, catching, and team games, which help enhance motor skills, coordination, and overall physical fitness. The curriculum also emphasizes teamwork and sportsmanship (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022).

Recent developments in Ukraine's education sector have continued despite the ongoing conflict. The New Ukrainian School (NUS) reform, initiated in 2017, aims to modernize education and align it with EU standards. This reform includes a focus on 21st-century skills, continuous professional development for teachers, and modernized education management. Physical education practices in Ukraine have evolved to balance natural growth and development with mastering fundamental skills and physical activity (Krasilshchikov et al., 2014).

In England, physical education (PE) is a statutory subject in the national curriculum for primary schools. The curriculum is designed to inspire pupils to succeed in competitive sports and other physically demanding activities. It aims to develop competence in a broad range of physical activities, ensure sustained physical activity, and promote healthy, active lifestyles (Department for Education, 2013; Swaithes, 2021).

The PE curriculum in England is divided into key stages. At Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7), pupils develop fundamental movement skills, including running, jumping, throwing, and catching. They engage in team games and perform dances using simple movement patterns. At Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11), pupils continue to develop a broader range of skills, learn to use them in different ways, and link them to create actions and sequences of movement. They participate in competitive games, develop flexibility, strength, technique, control, and balance, and perform dances using a range of movement patterns (Department for Education, 2013).

In Austria, primary school children typically receive two to three hours of physical education per week. The curriculum aims to promote physical fitness, motor skills, and overall health.

Activities include running, jumping, throwing, catching, gymnastics, and team sports. The curriculum also emphasizes the importance of social skills, teamwork, and cooperation

The Austrian education system is structured to provide a strong foundation in basic literacy and numeracy, while also nurturing the social and emotional development of young learners. Physical education is seen as a vital component of this holistic approach, helping students develop physical competence and a positive attitude towards physical activity (Federal Ministry of Education Austria, 2024).

3.2 Curricula comparison

3.2.1 Focus and Objectives

The Ukrainian curriculum places strong emphasis on the development of motor skills, coordination, physical fitness, teamwork, and sportsmanship. In contrast, the British curriculum highlights the importance of building competence across a broad range of physical activities, encouraging sustained physical engagement, and fostering healthy lifestyles. Meanwhile, the Austrian curriculum aims to enhance physical fitness and motor skills while also prioritizing overall health, the development of social skills, and the promotion of teamwork and cooperation among students

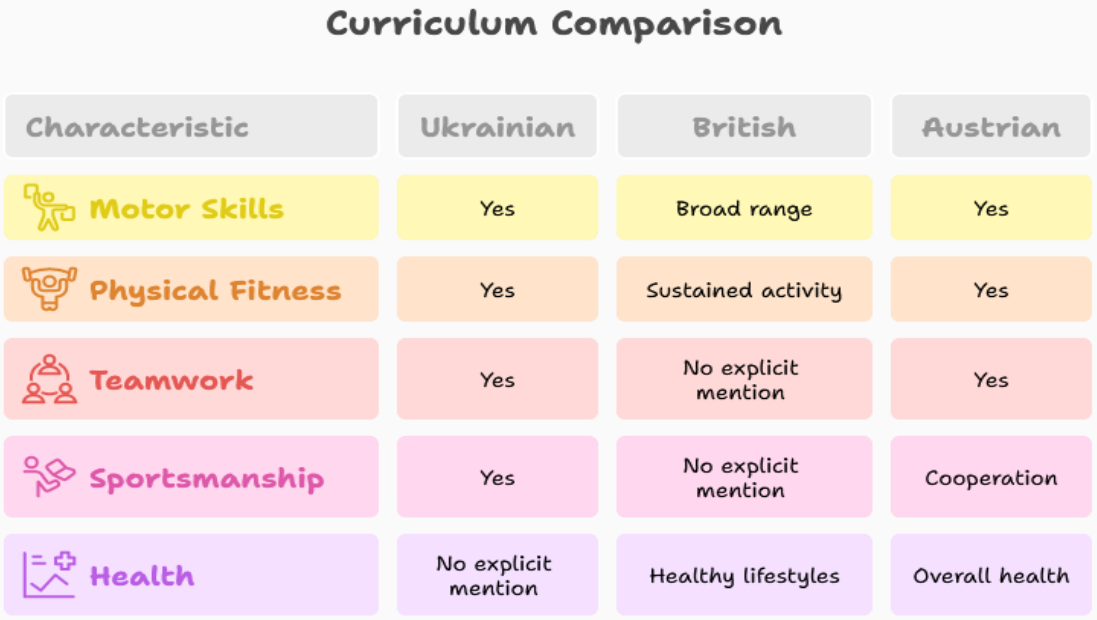

Figure 1: *Curriculum Comparison*

3.2.2 Activities and Skills

In terms of activities and skills promoted in physical education, the Ukrainian primary school curriculum includes running, jumping, throwing, catching, team games, and cooperative activities. The British curriculum offers a broader range of physical experiences, encompassing fundamental movement skills, team games, competitive sports, as well as elements such as flexibility, strength, technique, control, balance, and dance. The Austrian curriculum similarly incorporates running, jumping, throwing, and catching, while also placing emphasis on gymnastics and team sports.

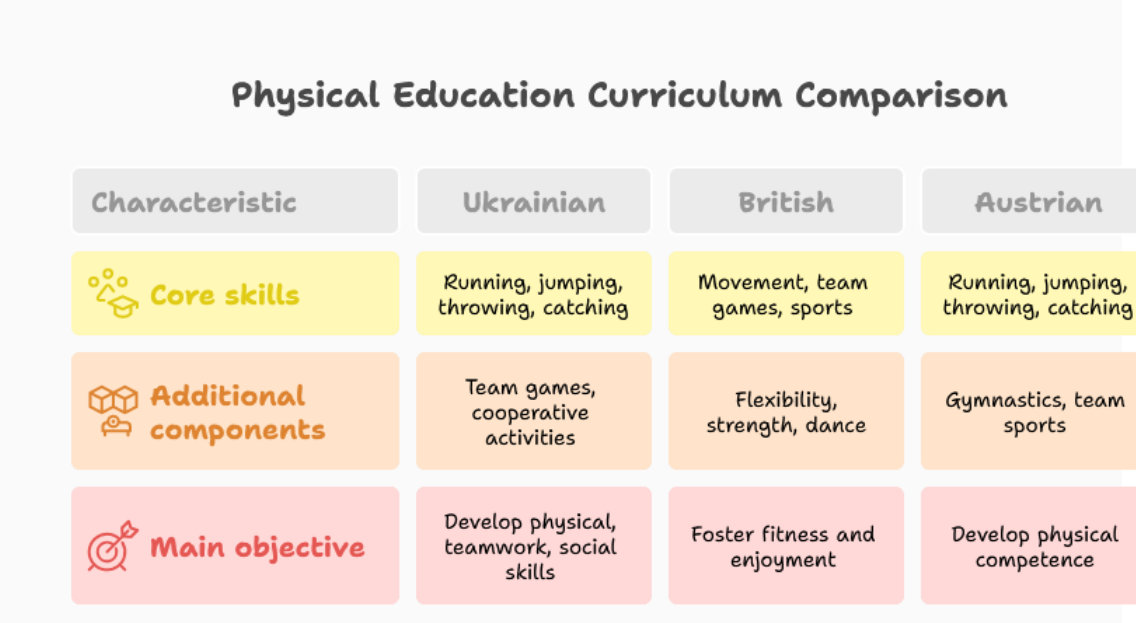

Figure 2: *Comparison of characteristics in PE*

3.2.3 Quantitative content analysis

The quantitative content analysis of the physical education curricula from Austria, Great Britain, and Ukraine revealed significant differences in the emphasis placed on specific educational perspectives. The most pronounced variation can be observed in the category of Health, where Great Britain demonstrates the highest frequency (N = 35), indicating a strong curricular focus on health education within its physical education framework. In contrast, Austria presents a moderate emphasis (N = 14), while Ukraine shows only marginal representation in this area (N = 1).

Similarly, the Motor Skills category follows a comparable trend. Great Britain again leads with a high absolute frequency (N = 24), reflecting its prioritization of physical development. Austria follows with a moderate count (N = 10), and Ukraine remains minimal (N = 3).

In the dimension of Social Competences, all three countries allocate noticeably less attention. Great Britain still maintains the highest frequency (N = 6), suggesting a relatively broader approach that includes social learning outcomes. Austria and Ukraine reflect minimal inclusion with N = 3 and N = 1, respectively.

The educational perspective of Inclusion is the least emphasized across all three national contexts. Great Britain again shows a comparatively higher frequency (N = 6), whereas Austria and Ukraine only register zero or marginal mentions (N = 0 and N = 1, respectively).

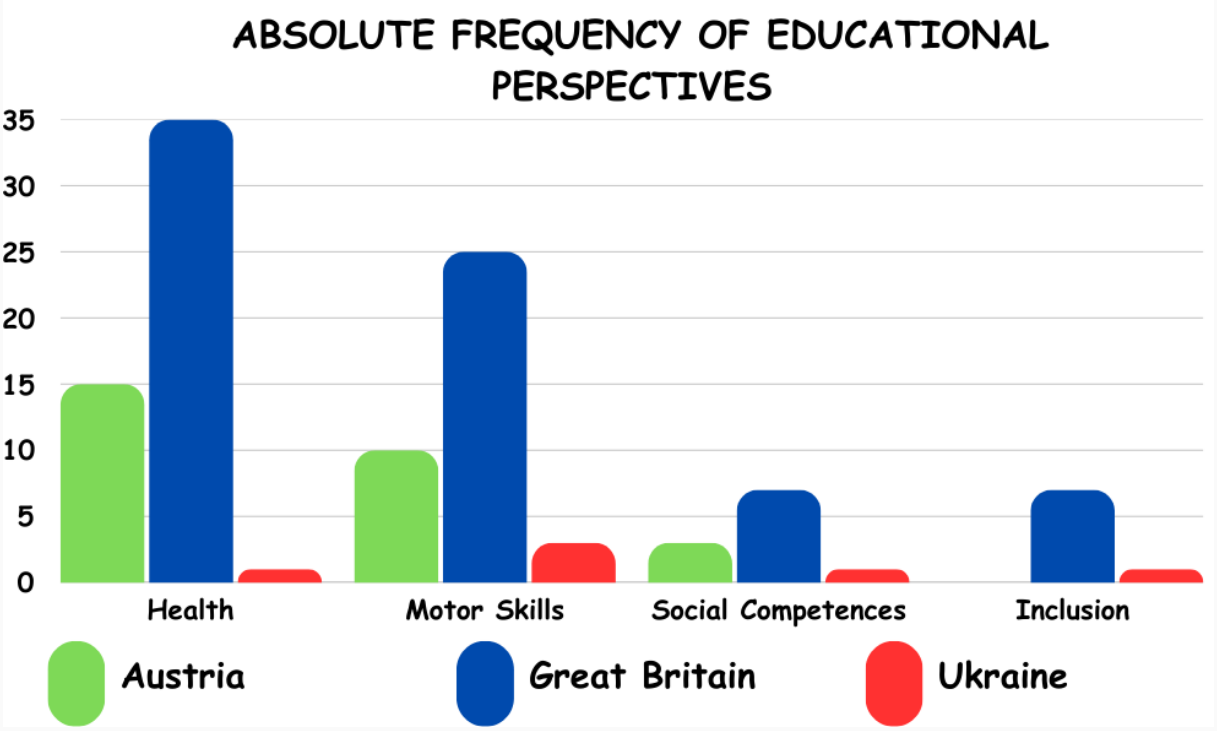

Figure 3: *Absolute frequency of educational perspectives across curricula*

The observed disparities in curricular emphasis reflect broader national priorities in physical education (PE) and reveal important implications for the integration of diverse student populations, including refugee youth. The comparatively comprehensive approach of Great Britain, which places substantial emphasis on health, motor skills, social competences, and inclusion, aligns with international recommendations advocating for holistic and inclusive physical education. According to Bailey et al. (2009), PE that fosters not only physical literacy but also personal and social development contributes significantly to young people's overall well-being and societal integration.

Austria's curriculum, while showing a clear focus on health and motor skill development, demonstrates limited engagement with social and inclusive dimensions. This partial approach may limit the potential of PE to contribute meaningfully to the psychosocial development of marginalized groups. As suggested by Geeraert et al. (2012), sport and physical activity settings can be powerful tools for social integration—but only if deliberately structured to promote inclusion and interpersonal skills.

The Ukrainian curriculum, in contrast, places minimal emphasis on any of the broader educational perspectives beyond basic physical skills. This narrow focus may reflect systemic challenges or differing pedagogical traditions but may also hinder the use of PE as a platform for supporting refugee learners. Research by Spaaij (2012) emphasizes that unstructured or skill-focused programs often fail to address the complex social needs of displaced youth and may unintentionally reinforce exclusion.

Moreover, the underrepresentation of inclusion as an explicit curricular goal across all three contexts - most notably in Austria and Ukraine - is concerning given the growing diversity in European classrooms. As noted by UNESCO (2015), inclusive education must be embedded not only in rhetoric but also in curriculum design, teacher training, and pedagogical practice.

3.2.4 Qualitative Analysis

This qualitative analysis examines the perspectives of Ukrainian physical education teachers who have relocated to Western European countries (Austria and Great Britain) following the 2022 conflict. Through in-depth interviews with five professionals distinct themes emerged regarding their experiences navigating different educational philosophies and practices. This analysis focuses on four key categories: health promotion, motor skills development, social competences, and inclusion approaches. The findings reveal meaningful contrasts between Ukrainian and Western European physical education systems, highlighting tensions between structured performance-based approaches and more child-centered inclusive methodologies.

Health (promotion)

The interviews revealed significant differences in approaches to health promotion between Ukrainian and Western European educational systems. Ukrainian teachers emphasized a structured approach linking physical performance to health outcomes, while noting that Western European systems tend to take a more holistic and integrated approach to health education.

Natalia (l. 15-19) highlighted the comprehensive nature of health promotion in British schools:

> *What I particularly value in the British system is how health promotion is integrated across the curriculum. It's not just confined to PE lessons. Children learn about nutrition, mental wellbeing, and the connection between physical activity and overall health in various subjects. This holistic approach helps students understand why physical activity matters, not just how to do it.*

This integrated perspective contrasts with the performance-oriented Ukrainian approach described by Viktor (. 21-24):

> *The Ukrainian system produces teenagers who are physically capable and mentally tough. We have clear progression standards for strength, endurance, speed, and agility. Students know exactly what they need to achieve, and they work systematically toward those goals.*

Dmytro (l. 13-15) expressed concerns about what he perceived as insufficient rigor in Austrian health education:

> *In Ukraine, we believe children need structure, discipline, and clear goals. Without that, how will they build resilience? Or learn to work hard?*

The interviews suggest that while Ukrainian teachers value the Western European focus on lifelong health habits, they often perceive these approaches as lacking the necessary structure and performance standards they believe are essential for comprehensive health development.

Motor Skills Development

Significant contrasts emerged in perceptions of motor skills development. Ukrainian approaches emphasize standardized skill progression with clear benchmarks, while Western European methods tend to be more developmental and individualized.

Natalia (l. 25-29) described the British approach to motor skills development:

> *The British approach to motor skills is more developmental and individualized. Teachers here use something called the 'multi-ability model' where children develop physical skills at their own pace across different domains like coordination, balance, agility, and spatial awareness. What's impressive is how they break down complex movements into manageable components and build them systematically.*

She further noted a focus on fundamental movement skills:

> *I've also noticed British schools put greater emphasis on fundamental movement skills in the early years—things like running, jumping, throwing, catching, balancing — before introducing sport-specific skills. This creates a stronger foundation for children to build upon as they get older (Natalia, l. 30-33).*

This developmental approach contrasts with the more structured Ukrainian system described by Olena (l. 11-15):

> *In Ukraine, physical education is a very structured and respected part of the curriculum. We follow a national program that emphasizes motor development, physical fitness, and moral values like sportsmanship and teamwork... We also often focus on measuring performance – times, distances, repetitions – to track progress.*

Viktor (l. 43-46) expressed concerns about what he perceived as insufficient depth in motor skills development in British schools:

> *I'm also concerned about the reduction in technical skill development. Many British PE programs offer a 'sampling' approach with numerous activities but insufficient depth in any of them. In Ukraine, we ensure students develop true competence in core physical activities, not just superficial exposure.*

These contrasting perspectives highlight a fundamental tension between standardized progression models and individualized developmental approaches to motor skills acquisition.

Social Competences

The integration of social competences within physical education emerged as a particularly contentious area. Ukrainian teachers recognized the value of social development but often felt

Western European systems overemphasized this aspect at the expense of physical development.

Viktor (l. 34-38 articulated this tension directly:

> *The overwhelming focus on social competences and inclusion dilutes the physical development aspect of PE. While these are noble aims, physical education should primarily be about physical excellence. I've observed lessons here where very little physical exertion occurs because so much time is spent on discussion, reflection, and ensuring everyone feels comfortable.*

He acknowledged some merit in the Western approach but maintained reservations:

> *I also recognize that the focus on teamwork and social development has merit, although I believe these qualities can be developed within a more rigorous physical framework. In Ukraine, team sports teach cooperation and communication while still maintaining high performance expectations (Viktor, l. 65-68).*

Maksym (l. 16-20) described the different emphasis in Austrian schools:

> *In Austria, the system feels more relaxed and child-centered. There is more emphasis on enjoyment, participation, and promoting social skills through movement.[…]. There is more emphasis on inclusion, cooperation, and lifelong health habits.*

Natalia (l. 56-58) highlighted the benefits of this approach for integration:

> *I've witnessed firsthand how structured physical activity helps Ukrainian children establish routines and regain a sense of normality. The emphasis on teamwork and collaboration in British PE lessons also accelerates social integration.*

The interviews reveal an ongoing tension between viewing social competences as primary outcomes versus secondary benefits of physical education programs.

Inclusion

The Western European emphasis on inclusion represented both an opportunity and a challenge from the perspective of Ukrainian teachers. While they valued the accessibility, they often questioned whether universal inclusion might compromise standards.

Natalia (l. 48-51). highlighted the benefits of inclusive approaches for Ukrainian children adapting to new environments:

> *The inclusive nature of PE in British schools has been tremendously helpful for Ukrainian children. Many arrive with varying levels of physical confidence and, of course, limited English. But movement is a universal language, and the British emphasis on participation over performance means these children can engage meaningfully from day one.*

Viktor (l. 69-71), while critical of certain aspects, acknowledged the strengths of inclusive approaches:

> *The British system is good at engaging a wider range of students, particularly those who might be alienated by a performance-focused approach... The British approach to adaptive PE for students with disabilities is also commendable—more developed than what we had in Ukraine. I've learned valuable strategies for meaningful inclusion without sacrificing challenge.*

However, he questioned whether inclusion sometimes came at too high a cost:

> *When everyone gets a participation trophy regardless of effort or ability, what incentive is there to push yourself? In Ukraine, we believe that facing challenges and occasionally experiencing failure builds resilience (Viktor, l. 16-18).*

Dmytro (l. 30-32) expressed similar sentiments regarding Austrian approaches:

> *[…] It's more inclusive. It reduces stress. It allows children with different needs to participate. I can see why it works for some. But I think it's missing balance. A child should feel safe, yes—but also be pushed to grow.*

The divergent perspectives on inclusion reveal fundamental philosophical differences regarding whether physical education should prioritize universal participation or excellence and achievement.

The analysis reveals significant tensions between Ukrainian and Western European physical education approaches across all four examined categories. Ukrainian teachers consistently valued structure, clear standards, measurable outcomes, and competitive elements, while acknowledging benefits in Western European approaches to inclusion and holistic development.

These findings suggest opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and potential hybrid approaches that maintain rigorous standards while ensuring inclusive practices. As Natalia (l. 86-89) noted:

> *I would just emphasize that both systems have their strengths. What I've tried to do in my teaching assistant role is blend the best of both worlds—bringing some of the technical rigor and disciplined approach from Ukrainian physical education while embracing the inclusivity, developmental focus, and holistic health promotion of the British system.*

This sentiment reflects the potential for educational systems to learn from one another, particularly when supporting displaced students navigating different educational philosophies.

4. Discussion

The contrasting perspectives highlight fundamental differences in how the role of the physical education teacher is conceptualized. Ukrainian teachers appear to operate from what Kirk (2013) describes as a "directive pedagogical approach," positioning themselves as authoritative experts responsible for transmitting knowledge and skills through structured instruction. Western European approaches align more closely with what Mosston and Ashworth (2008) term "discovery" or "guided discovery" teaching styles, where educators function as facilitators of learning experiences rather than direct instructors.

This pedagogical shift represents a significant professional identity challenge for Ukrainian teachers. As Dowling (2011) notes, physical education teachers often derive their professional identity from their instructional approach and relationship with students. Viktor P.'s observation that "some colleagues view my methods as outdated or too demanding" reflects this tension, suggesting that pedagogical differences extend beyond mere technique to fundamental questions of professional purpose and value.

The interviews indicate that this transition requires substantial adaptation, as expressed by Dmytro (l. 11-13):

> *The approach is very soft. There is a lot of freedom, too much in my opinion. The Austrian system avoids pressure, avoids competition, avoids grading or firm expectations, especially in primary school."*

This sentiment aligns with research by MacPhail et al. (2019), who found that physical education teachers often experience significant professional identity disruption when transitioning between educational systems with divergent pedagogical philosophies.

Moreover, the interviews reveal multifaceted integration challenges faced by Ukrainian teenagers in Western European physical education contexts. These challenges extend beyond language barriers to include fundamental differences in expectations, motivational structures, and performance recognition. As Olena (l. 32-35) noted:

> *Language is, of course, the biggest barrier. Even though movement is a universal language, instructions and rules in PE still rely on verbal communication. Some children feel lost at first. They are used to a different kind of structure, and it takes time to adjust to the more open and flexible style of Austrian education.*

This observation aligns with research by Terwiel et al. (2021), who found that refugee students often experience "embodied barriers" in physical education contexts—challenges that manifest at the intersection of linguistic, cultural, and physical domains.

Viktor (l. 53-55) highlighted how the shift in competitive structures impacts highly skilled Ukrainian youth:

> *I've observed Ukrainian students becoming frustrated by the lack of challenge. One boy who was an accomplished gymnast in Ukraine told me he feels his skills are regressing because the expectations here are so much lower.*

This frustration reflects what Agergaard et al. (2018) term "talent displacement"—the experience of young athletes who find their previously valued skills and achievements unrecognized or devalued in new cultural contexts. For Ukrainian teenagers accustomed to measurable achievement markers and competitive recognition, the transition to participation-focused models may represent not just pedagogical adjustment but a fundamental reconceptualization of what constitutes success in physical activity.

Natalia (l. 81-83) observed that adaptation processes vary significantly:

> *That said, I've found most children adapt quickly and come to appreciate the developmental approach. Many parents have told me their children are now more enthusiastic about physical activity than they were in Ukraine because the pressure has been reduced.*

Interestingly, this aligns with Fazel et al.'s (2012) finding that refugee children demonstrate remarkable adaptability when provided appropriate support structures, suggesting that integration challenges, while significant, are not insurmountable.

What is more, the interviews reveal complex manifestations of what sociological literature terms the "Otherness" effect—the experience of being perceived and positioned as culturally different or outside the dominant group (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). This effect operates bi-directionally in the described contexts.

Ukrainian teachers experience professional Otherness when their pedagogical approaches are viewed as outdated or excessively demanding. As Viktor (l. 89-90) noted:

> *It's been mixed. Some colleagues view my methods as outdated or too demanding. There have been uncomfortable conversations about expectations and assessment.*

This positioning as pedagogical "Others" often leads to what Macdonald et al. (2021) describe as defensive professional identity work, where teachers feel compelled to justify their approaches against perceived criticism from the dominant educational culture.

Simultaneously, Ukrainian students experience Otherness through what Dagkas (2016) terms "physical capital displacement"—finding that their physical abilities and competencies are valued differently in new educational contexts. This displacement is evident in Viktor P.'s observation (l. 49-52):

> *Many Ukrainian children find the transition challenging, particularly those who were high achievers in our sports system. They come from an environment where excellence is expected and celebrated, then enter a system where participation seems to be the only requirement.*

Refugee physical education experiences are further complicated by what Spaaij et al. (2019) term "embodied difference"—the hypervisibility of cultural differences in physically expressive contexts like sport and physical education. As Maksym. (l. 36-38) observed:

> *Also, many Ukrainian students come with emotional burdens—the trauma of war, displacement, and uncertainty. While Austrian schools try to be supportive, there is sometimes a lack of understanding about what these children have been through.*

This lack of understanding reflects what Doherty and Taylor (2007) identify as a gap between inclusive intentions and practical implementation in physical education for refugee students, where well-meaning inclusion efforts may inadvertently reinforce experiences of Otherness by failing to acknowledge specific needs and backgrounds.

Despite these challenges, the interviews suggest opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and potential hybrid approaches that maintain rigorous standards while ensuring inclusive practices. As Natalia (l. 86-89) noted:

> *I would just emphasize that both systems have their strengths. What I've tried to do in my teaching assistant role is blend the best of both worlds—bringing some of the technical rigor and disciplined approach from Ukrainian physical education while embracing the inclusivity, developmental focus, and holistic health promotion of the British system.*

This sentiment reflects what López-Pastor et al. (2013) describe as "critical hybridization"—the intentional integration of diverse pedagogical approaches to create context-appropriate educational practices. Such hybridization may be particularly valuable in multicultural educational settings, allowing for the preservation of culturally valued practices while adapting to new contexts.

The experiences of Ukrainian teachers suggest potential for bidirectional learning, aligning with Flintoff's (2018) argument that cultural diversity in physical education should be approached not as a challenge to be overcome but as an opportunity for pedagogical enrichment and innovation.

5. Conclusion

Recent developments in the primary school curricula of Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Austria reflect evolving educational priorities and reform efforts. In Ukraine, the curriculum has undergone significant modernization through the New Ukrainian School (NUS) reform, which emphasizes the acquisition of 21st-century skills and supports continuous professional development for educators. In the United Kingdom, statutory guidance ensures that all pupils build physical competence, participate in competitive sports, and adopt healthy, active lifestyles. Austria’s curriculum places a strong emphasis on holistic development, promoting not only physical competence but also fostering positive attitudes towards physical activity.

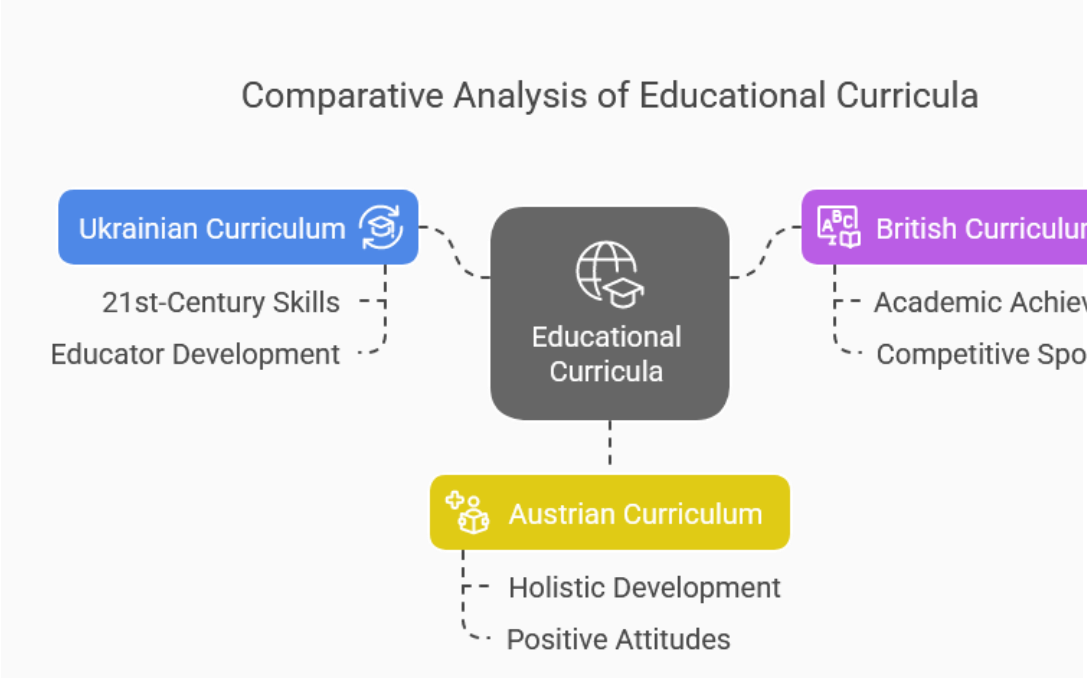

Figure 4: *Comparative analysis of curricula*

Overall, this analysis highlights how cultural and philosophical differences fundamentally shape physical education approaches, with Ukrainian systems generally emphasizing structure, measurement, and achievement, while Western European systems prioritize inclusion, individualization, and social development. These differences present both challenges and opportunities for Ukrainian children and teachers navigating educational transitions in Western European contexts.

The findings align with Azzarito et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of physical education as a culturally situated practice reflecting broader societal values and priorities. The tension between performance-oriented and participation-oriented models observed in this study echoes what Hardman (2008) identified as a global trend of philosophical divergence in physical education curricula, with significant implications for teacher education and professional development.

The experiences of Ukrainian teachers and students illustrate what Dagkas and Armour (2012) term "pedagogical border crossing"—the complex process of navigating educational transitions across cultural boundaries. As demonstrated in our findings, this process involves not only practical adaptations but also fundamental reconsiderations of professional identity and educational philosophy.

The perspectives of Ukrainian physical education teachers offer valuable insights for educational policymakers and practitioners working with refugee and immigrant populations. Their experiences suggest that effective integration may require finding balance between maintaining high expectations while ensuring accessible and supportive learning environments, supporting Benn and Pfister's (2013) argument that inclusive physical education must simultaneously acknowledge cultural difference and provide equitable participation opportunities.

As Block and Obrusnikova (2017) argue, genuine inclusion in physical education requires moving beyond mere presence toward meaningful participation—a goal that demands recognition of diverse cultural understandings of physical activity, achievement, and educational purpose. The tensions revealed in this study highlight the importance of what Flintoff and Dowling (2019) describe as "culturally responsive pedagogy" in physical education—approaches that acknowledge and build upon the diverse physical cultures students bring to educational settings.

Future research should explore student perspectives to complement teacher insights, examining how Ukrainian youth navigate and make meaning of their physical education experiences in Western European contexts. Following Hastie et al.'s (2020) recommendation for participatory approaches with refugee youth in physical education settings, such research could provide additional insights into optimal approaches for supporting educational transitions in physical education contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking adaptation processes over time would enhance understanding of how integration challenges evolve and how best to support sustainable pedagogical transformations, as suggested by Robinson et al. (2019) in their work on refugee education in physical activity contexts.

In sum, the curricular focus on broader educational outcomes such as health promotion, social learning, and inclusion plays a critical role in leveraging physical education as a tool for integration. Countries like Great Britain, which embed these themes more extensively, may be better positioned to harness the integrative potential of sport and movement education in multicultural school settings.

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