

## 7. ATTITUDES OF CROATIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN TOWARDS REFUGEE CHILDREN

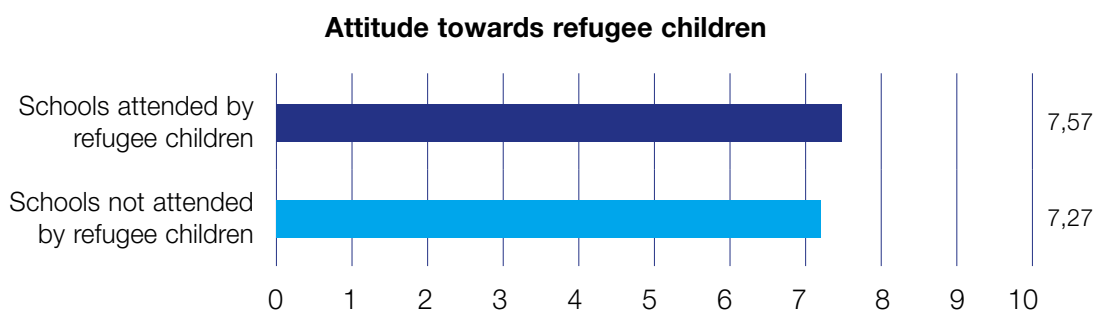
At the beginning of school year 2021/2022, we conducted a study into the attitudes of Croatian elementary school children towards refugee children. The study was conducted immediately before the Ukraine war started, and presents a good basis for comparison for future studies.

A total of 2217 students participated in the study (50% boys), attending second to eighth grade in 24 elementary schools in Zagreb (*Braća Radić Elementary School, Fran Galović Elementary School, Gustav Krklec Elementary School, Ivo Andrić Elementary School, Jure Kaštelan Elementary School, Lovro pl. Matačić Elementary School, Lučko Elementary School, Marija Jurić Zagorka Elementary School, Medvedgrad Elementary School, Mladost Elementary School, Otok Elementary School, Oton Iveković Elementary School, Pavelek Miškina Elementary School, Petar Preradović Elementary School, Sesvetska Sopnica Elementary School, Špansko Oranice Elementary School, Većeslav Holjevac Elementary School, Vinko Žganec Elementary School*), Karlovac (*Banija Elementary School, Braća Seljan Elementary School, Dragojla Jarnević Elementary School, Grabrik Elementary School*), Zadar (*Šime Budinić Elementary School*) and Sisak (*Braća Bobetko Elementary School*). A total of 739 students came from classes that were attended by refugee children, and 1478 students came from schools where, at the time of the study, there were no refugee children in attendance. We wanted to examine the attitudes of elementary school students about refugee children, as well as to compare the attitudes of children who had the opportunity to be in contact with refugee children in their classes with those who had no such experience. As has been said earlier, positive contact is the best way to reduce prejudice and develop positive attitudes.

We asked all students about their attitudes towards refugee children. More specifically, we asked them what they thought about refugee children, which characteristics, in their opinion, describe refugee children, which feelings refugee children evoke, how acceptable they found different types of relations with refugee children, whether they believed that their teachers and peers expected them to

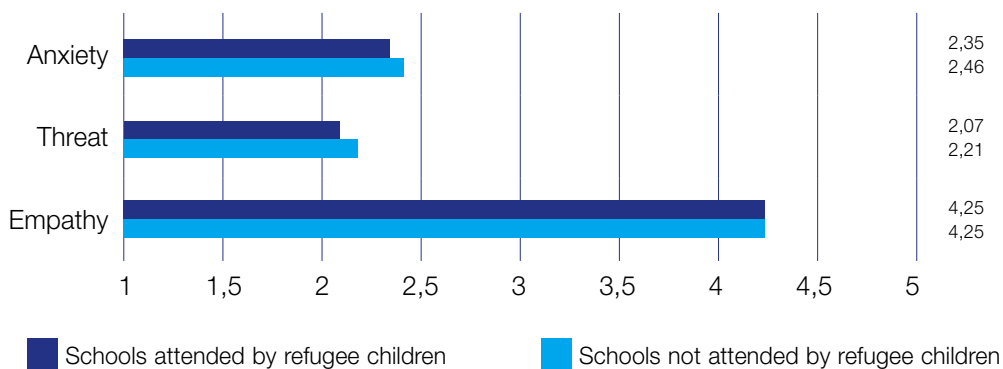
socialize with refugee children, whether they would like to socialize with refugee children, and how refugee children should behave once they come to Croatia.

Average results in both groups of schools are very encouraging, and show that Croatian students have unequivocally positive attitudes towards refugee children. However, the attitude towards refugees is somewhat more positive in schools and/or classes attended by refugee children, that is to say among children in direct contact with refugees.

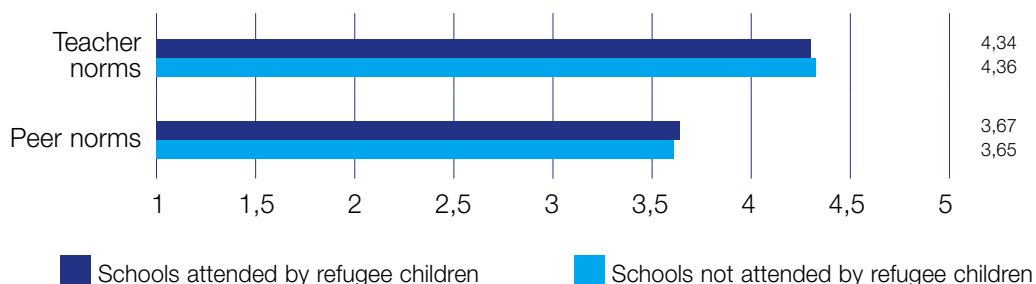


We additionally checked which characteristics students attribute to refugee children. The results show that children who attended a class with refugee children also attributed more positive characteristics to them – they considered them neater, more polite and friendlier than their peers who did not have a chance to socialize with refugees. However, the results showed that children who attended a class with refugees also considered them somewhat lazier than children in schools where there were no refugees. It should be emphasized that these differences are small, and that children's attitudes towards refugees are largely positive.

In line with this, children from schools attended by refugees felt significantly less anxiety when thinking about refugees, and saw them as less of a threat than children attending schools where there were no refugees. Thus, positive effects of school contact with refugee children on the attitudes and experience of their host-society peers are obvious. However, it should be noted that all children, regardless of whether they attended school with refugees or not, felt a high level of empathy and low levels of anxiety and threat.

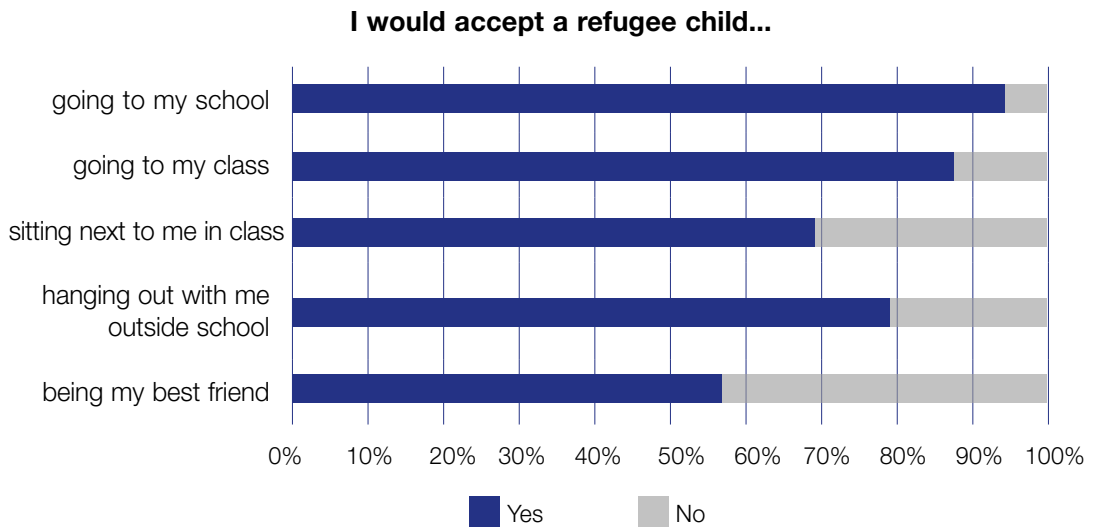


Children's attitudes and behaviors are largely shaped by norms, i.e., what they believe that their teachers and peers expect. It is encouraging to see that all the children believed that their teachers would support them if they socialized with refugee children, and expected cooperation and friendship to develop between them. This is a very important finding, because experience of institutional support is one of the key prerequisites for successful intergroup contact. Children also reported that their peers expected them to socialize with refugees, which means that peer opinions do not pose an obstacle in this sense. However, this score is lower than that relating to teacher expectations, which is why school interventions should encourage children to socialize with refugee children.



We also asked children about their social distance – how acceptable they found different types of relations with refugee children (e.g., sitting next to them in class, going to the same class, socializing outside of school, being good friends). Children's responses showed that nearly everyone would gladly accept refugee children to attend the same school and class as them. Most children would sit next to refugee children and would socialize with them outside of school. Moreover, over half of them would accept a refugee child as their best

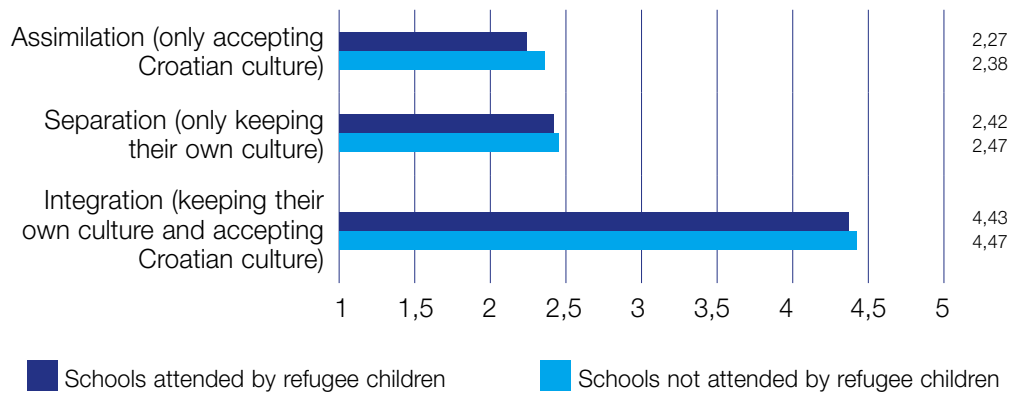
friend. This leads to the conclusion that Croatian students have a relatively low social distance, finding different types of relations with refugee children acceptable. These findings are the same for all children, regardless of whether they attended a class with a refugee child or not.



Moreover, students reported that they would like to socialize with refugee children if they had an opportunity, and, interestingly, this desire was more pronounced among students who did not have this experience, which points to their openness.

We also asked Croatian students how refugee children should behave when they come to Croatia, with regard to retaining their own culture and accepting the Croatian culture. The responses show that students consider both important. In other words, most students would like refugee children to preserve their own culture and also accept Croatian culture, which shows children’s readiness for integration as a desirable adaptive outcome of contact between different groups and cultures. It is particularly important to point out that children who socialized with refugees considered assimilation as a less desirable outcome than children in schools without refugees, where assimilation meant completely rejecting their own culture and customs and accepting Croatian culture and customs.

# Attitudes of croatian elementary school children towards refugee children



## What have we learned about refugee children and host-society children?

We have learned from refugee children and their Croatian peers what helped all of them to feel better and to socialize more with each other.

- Refugee children felt better in their class if their Croatian peers approached them first, introduced themselves and showed that they wanted to socialize with them. This is very important, because now we know the best course of action for host-society children when a refugee child comes to their class.
- Refugee children do not find learning Croatian easy. It is easier for them if friends from the class help them. Any sort of help is welcome, it is important to show good will and willingness to help one's peers in mastering the language.
- Refugee children were also helped by playing and socializing with their Croatian peers, and they learned the language faster in that way. This can be seen from what refugee children said in the interviews:

**But what is the trick to learn the language, apart from having an older sister?**

*Well, reading. And, like, hanging out with friends and stuff. That is good for learning too. That helped me a lot.*

**And what is the best way to learn Croatian?**

*With someone's help, with a friend, or something like that... When we write homework, I often write homework with friends and stuff. Then if I do not understand something, I ask them and that.*

**What would your advice be to children coming to Croatia who do not speak Croatian, what is the trick to learn it?**

*Playing games. You can play football, you can play Uno in class, in the third grade and in the fourth... Yes, I remember that we played Uno in the fourth grade, in class. You should play games!*

- Host-society children found language to be the greatest obstacle in socializing with refugee children, but they said that they were not prepared for the arrival of refugee children to their class and did not know what to expect. Therefore, it would help them to think beforehand how they could socialize with refugee children to be ready to approach them later, which is what imagined contact workshops in this handbook offer; other creative approaches helping children think about this beforehand may also be helpful.

We learned that everything is much easier once children learn Croatian, because then they can talk to each other, learn, and even whisper to each other during class. Until refugee children have mastered the language, everyone can still socialize in school. This is where the workshops that we have devised – which do not require knowing the language – may be helpful. We hope that everyone conducting the workshops will have fun, we wish you success in using the activities, and we hope that your work will be filled with laughter and joy.