

# A Case Study of A Russian Boy's Schooling Experience since the Russian-Ukrainian Conflicts

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Received: January 2, 2025; Accepted: February 13, 2025; Published: February 14, 2025

## Abstract

This case study explores the challenges faced by Alex, a Russian immigrant student attending school in Slovenia during the Russia-Ukraine conflicts in 2022. The study examines how the conflict impacted Alex's academic performance, social integration, and mental well-being, highlighting alienation, discrimination, and the challenges of adjusting to a new educational environment. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the paper analyses the interactions between Alex's immediate and broader social contexts, including family, school, and society. The research draws attention to the status quo of inclusive education in Slovenia, discussing the barriers and opportunities for supporting immigrant students in the classroom. Finally, the paper proposes practical strategies for educators to foster resilience in immigrant students, emphasising cultural sensitivity, social support, and developing a positive learning environment.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, immigrant students, Bronfenbrenner's theory, students' resilience

## 1. Introduction

As a linguistic specialist, I taught an international class group twice a week in 2022 and had the opportunity to teach a selective world-language course here in Slovenia. As a foreigner and outsider to the mainstream Slovenian community, one of my students, Alex (who adopted a pseudonym hereafter to ensure anonymity), a Russian immigrant to Slovenia in the sixth grade, captured my attention.

Immigrant youths like Alex often encounter academic and personal challenges and struggle to acclimate to new circumstances due to feelings of loneliness, hatred, and the desire to adapt [4]. He was a gifted student-athlete with a long list of outstanding academic achievements. Since the commencement of the Russia-Ukraine war, Alex's social and mental well-being at school has been gravely jeopardised. He was at a disadvantage as a Russian immigrant student from a diplomatic family at the height of political tensions between his adopted country and Ukraine. After talking with his home class teacher, my colleague and I think it is time to help Alex feel more included and resilient.

As the number of immigrant and racial/ethnic minority students in Slovenian schools increases, inclusive education is becoming a more significant topic in this country. Some studies have found positive attitudes towards inclusive education among Slovenian teachers and parents [10][19], whereas others have revealed negative attitudes [20]. According to Lesar (2006), while the concept of inclusive education is included in the curriculum of current pedagogical study programmes, it is often not fully integrated, and there is a lack of specific training for teachers on how to include and support different students in the classroom [10].

This paper will discuss the status quo of inclusive education in Slovenia, review inclusive education theories, analyse a Russian student attending school in Slovenia using Bronfenbrenner's framework, and propose solutions to the problems arising in Alex's emerging case.

## 2. The Case of a Russian Student Alex in Slovenia

Alex had a wicked sense of humour and was charming, gregarious, and sociable, and this reputation extended to his interactions with instructors and classmates. However, he felt increasingly alienated as the Russia-Ukraine war escalated. The conflict was a frequent topic of discussion among his fellow pupils and teachers, and he could see that his presence made some of them uncomfortable. Unable to think of anything to say, he chose to ignore the issue and act as if it didn't.

This is common among immigrant students, who may feel pressure to conform to the majority culture at the expense of academic accomplishment [18]. If this happens, the individual may experience loneliness and alienation, hurting their ability to focus on class. Alex's concentration in class was unaffected, but he was more conscious of his worsening academic performance. He lacked the same level of motivation he formerly had and needed help maintaining his focus. His home class teacher could see he was in pain and routinely checked to see how he was doing. Even though he told his teachers everything was okay, he knew it was not. This fits with research [3], which shows that immigrant children may need to work harder in school because they have more daily responsibilities.

Alex's isolation and loneliness drove him down academically, socially, and mentally over time, and his circumstances worsened with each passing day. Instead of participating in class, he always looked for excuses to leave. He was intensely aware of the desire to share his feelings with another person but needed clarification about whom he should talk to.

### **3. The Climate of Inclusive Education in Slovenia**

Inclusive education has been adopted in several nations worldwide with differing degrees of success. Stepaniuk (2019) reviewed inclusive education in Eastern European countries and discovered that while progress has been made in some countries, significant obstacles remain to implementing it in the region. These include a lack of resources and trained personnel and persistently negative attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities [21]. Although obstacles still exist, Slovenia has made progress in establishing inclusive education.

While there were some excellent initiatives by schools and teachers to include Romani and migrant children from the former Yugoslavia, Lesar et al. (2006) discovered that there were also significant hurdles and impediments, such as a lack of resources and teacher training, prejudice and discrimination, and a lack of parental engagement [10].

In addition to successfully assisting these students in the classroom, schools emphasised the importance of incorporating the community and addressing societal bias and discrimination. Šuc et al. (2016) investigated the views of Slovenian primary school teachers toward inclusive education in a qualitative exploratory study [23]. According to the poll, while teachers generally had positive attitudes toward inclusion, there were concerns about the need for more significant resources and training to serve different children in the classroom successfully. Teachers also mentioned the need for increased support from parents, school administrators, and society to implement inclusive education properly.

Štemberger and Kiswarday (2018) researched Slovenian preschool and primary school teachers' opinions toward inclusive education [20]. They discovered that while teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were generally positive, there were worries about needing more resources and training to appropriately support different pupils in the classroom. Teachers also mentioned the need for increased support from parents, school administrators, and society to implement inclusive education properly. Schmidt et al. (2014) echoed the attitudes of Slovenian parents toward preschool inclusion. They discovered that while most parents held positive attitudes toward inclusion, parents' concerns regarded the lack of resources and support for inclusive education [19].

According to the literature, while there is a fundamental understanding of the importance of inclusive education in Slovenia, there are also serious issues and hurdles to properly aiding immigrant and ethnic minority students in the classroom. These barriers include inadequate resources and training, prejudice and discrimination, and parental participation. The studies also emphasise the importance of involving the community and addressing systemic bias and discrimination to aid these students in the classroom [19][20]. To improve immigrant children's educational experiences, more resources and teacher training are needed [1][19][23], as well as a more inclusive school atmosphere and support system [7].

### **4. Theory Review on Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is hotly contested, and many scholars offer various definitions and interpretations. At its core, inclusive education refers to the belief that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, should be able to access and participate in the same educational opportunities and experiences. This belief is essential because it ensures all students have equal educational opportunities and experiences. Instead of separating or isolating kids who may be viewed as different or require special accommodations, this strategy aims to create a friendly and inclusive environment for all pupils.

Early definitions of inclusion in education mainly focused on including students with disabilities in regular classes. However, in recent years, inclusive education, which more often refers to educating kids with disabilities in mainstream classes alongside their non-disabled peers, has received more attention for encouraging the inclusion and integration of marginalised students. Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020) discovered that the number of studies

on inclusive education had expanded dramatically since the 1994 passage of the Salamanca Statement, which asserted the right of students with disabilities to an inclusive education [9].

Stepaniuk (2019) researched inclusive education in Eastern European nations [21]. While inclusive education is gaining pace in Eastern European nations, there are still substantial problems and barriers to properly engaging diverse children in the classroom, according to the study's findings. Inclusive education is gaining momentum, but there are still considerable obstacles to implementing inclusive practices effectively in classrooms, such as a lack of resources and negative attitudes toward inclusion and different kids [1].

Armstrong (2014) studied how educators perceive children with social, emotional, and behavioural issues. The study indicated that educators frequently hold negative views of these children, which can lead to exclusion and marginalisation in the classroom. This is a fundamental impediment to inclusive education, which attempts to include and support all children, including those with social, emotional, and behavioural issues.

In their literature review, Domingo-Martos et al. (2022) discovered that while the concept of inclusion has been embraced in many countries, there is still a lack of understanding of what inclusion truly means and how it can be implemented effectively [7]. They believe that inclusion should be viewed through the lens of social justice, which focuses on removing systemic barriers and providing an equitable opportunity to all children.

According to research, teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices may significantly influence the achievement and involvement of all students, particularly those children who may be marginalised or are in danger of being excluded [13]. One of the most important aspects is the significance of pedagogy and teaching methods in fostering inclusiveness. This includes requiring teachers to profoundly understand their students' varied requirements and experiences, employ inclusive teaching practices, and consider these variations [14]. Li and Ruppert (2020) and Wray et al. (2022) investigate the idea of teacher agency in the context of inclusive education [11][25]. They suggest that teachers play an essential part in determining the educational opportunities available to students.

Implementing inclusive teaching methods and assessing their effectiveness has caught more attention recently. One way is to develop teachers' understanding and appreciation of the varied student populations they instruct. Messiou et al. (2016) developed a teacher development technique focused on learning from differences to improve respect and understanding of student diversity in the classroom [14]. The potential for collaborative art-making to improve intercultural education and alleviate marginalisation is a significant research topic in inclusive education. Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2017) examined the effectiveness of this strategy and concluded that collaborative art-making could be an effective method for fostering inclusion and understanding among diverse student populations [8]. Subban et al. (2022) did a comprehensive literature analysis on the inclusive education experiences of secondary school pupils [22]. They discovered that inclusive education could positively impact students' academic achievement, social interactions, and general well-being. Still, additional research is required to completely comprehend the benefits of inclusive education on diverse student groups.

Students' inclusive education experiences can also differ depending on many circumstances. Inclusive education research has also focused on the social justice viewpoint of inclusion, which focuses on resolving equality issues and upholding the rights of marginalised groups [7]. Inclusive education can both oppose and promote the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as children from low-income households or racial/ethnic minority groups [1].

Including migrant and refugee students has been a subject of inclusive education research [2][10]. Armstrong (2014) did a literature analysis on including kids with social, emotional, and behavioural challenges and concluded that while inclusive education can benefit these students, teachers must get enough support and training to adequately fulfil the students' needs [2]. Lesar et al. (2006) also investigated the incorporation of migrant and refugee kids in Slovenian elementary schools. They discovered that creating inclusive policies and teacher training can facilitate the successful inclusion of these students [10].

A supportive school environment can also include utilising inclusive practices such as flexible seating arrangements, assistive technology, and universal design principles to cater to each student [11]. These practices can help to create an environment that is more welcoming and inclusive for all students, including those who may require additional support or accommodations due to disabilities or other factors. This can be accomplished by creating a space accessible to students with a wide range of needs.

In addition to pedagogy and school settings, it is vital to evaluate the influence of systemic and structural variables on marginalisation and exclusion within the education system. This includes concerns like financing inequities across schools. Curriculum and assessment processes may be prejudiced or culturally insensitive, and policies and procedures may disproportionately negatively impact particular groups of pupils [9]. Resolving these structural

difficulties can be difficult and time-consuming, but advancing genuine inclusion and fairness in the education system is necessary.

In general, the body of research examined for this article sheds light on the complex and diverse character of inclusive education and the requirement for a nuanced and comprehensive approach to resolving concerns around marginalisation in educational settings. A focus on diversity, inclusive teaching, supportive school settings, and structural change can assist in creating educational experiences that are more inclusive and inviting for all students, even though problems and difficulties will continue to exist.

### **5. Viewing the Case via Bronfenbrenner's Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a valuable framework for analysing the development of foreign-born students. This theory emphasises the importance of addressing the interactions between systems- the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem- when creating a child's experience through inclusive education [5]. Teachers and other professionals who better understand these relationships can better support and encourage immigrant students' progress. Bronfenbrenner developed this concept alone.

To apply Bronfenbrenner's theory to the assessment of immigrant kids' development, it is necessary to analyse how each system may influence students' experiences. It is also critical to consider how the student may affect each system. For example, a child's family may provide a robust support system and cultural connection. Still, they may have difficulties in their community or school due to language barriers or discrimination. Educators and other professionals can help immigrant children grow if they are better aware of the interactions between various organisations.

The ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner offers an all-encompassing framework for comprehending the intricate and many circumstances that might lead to the marginalisation of immigrant students such as Alex, a student who came from Russia to Slovenia [5]. According to this idea, people are immersed in diverse and interrelated systems that impact their development and life experiences. Alex is in a precarious position at school due to the commencement of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine.

A student's microsystem is their immediate surroundings, which includes their family, classmates, and teachers. These relationships are critical for students' development and progress because they provide security and consistency while influencing their sense of self, self-confidence, and social skills. Personal growth and development are required for academic success [5]. Students with a negative and unsupportive relationship with a peer group may feel isolated and have low self-esteem. In contrast, a student's positive and supportive relationship with their teacher may increase motivation and interest in class [17].

Alex's microsystem, which encompasses the immediate context in which he is reared, is another factor leading to Alex's marginalisation. The onset of conflict may have contributed to pre-existing linguistic and cultural divides between Alex and the other students in his class. Because of this, it is possible that immigrant students had trouble developing healthy relationships and a sense of belonging within the school community, which might have contributed to feelings of alienation and marginalisation. Alex's difficulties with language and cultural differences may have made it difficult for him to fully participate in class and connect with his classmates, which further contributed to Alex's feelings of isolation.

The term mesosystem refers to the interactions and effects between a student's direct and indirect relationships and can affect the student. These encounters occur within the student's social setting, such as conversations in a student's home and school life [5]. For example, students with a good relationship with their family but a bad relationship with their instructor may struggle in school owing to the contradicting messages and lack of support they receive from both groups. Furthermore, a student's family, society, and culture can impact the mesosystem by shaping their beliefs and worldviews during their academic career.

Alex's marginalisation is further contributed to by the mesosystem, which refers to the interactions and impacts between a student's relationships and their ties with others in their broader environment. For instance, Alex could have difficulty in school owing to contradictory messages and a lack of support from his family and his instructor if he has a positive relationship with his family but a negative one with his teacher. This might result in feelings of alienation and marginalisation at school. After consulting with Alex's home class teacher, she told me that his challenges in adapting to the school setting might have been worsened by the contradicting messages he felt he received and insufficient help, making it more challenging to achieve academically and socially. However, the school and teachers did not want to bring too much attention to the concept of additional support since this might cause complaints from other students' parents.

Alex's marginalisation is furthered by the exosystem, which refers to the environment that he is surrounded by. The exosystem is the environment that surrounds a student and has the potential to impact their behaviour and decisions significantly. This environment may include aspects unrelated to the student's academic or professional life, such as the student's parent's workplace or local community activities [5]. For example, a student's academic and professional performance may be influenced by their parents' employment stability or the availability of extracurricular activities in their neighbourhood. The onset of war may have caused stress and challenges for Alex's family, such as financial instability or trouble obtaining resources. These issues may have been brought on directly due to the conflict. Alex's academic and social growth may have suffered since he may need more assistance or access to sufficient resources. Alex's inability to participate in extracurricular activities due to a lack of money may have further alienated him from his peers. This may have been a contributing factor to Alex's social withdrawal.

Finally, macrosystem refers to the more extensive social variables influencing a student's available experiences and opportunities. Cultural attitudes, values, economic conditions, and governmental norms are examples of these components [5]. Immigrant students may encounter a macrosystem comprised of the cultural and linguistic barriers they experience in their new country and popular immigration policies and opinions in that culture. Alex's marginalisation from mainstream Slovenian culture is mainly attributable to the macrosystem, which refers to the more fundamental aspects of society. It is possible that rising tensions and prejudice towards Russians in the host country directly resulted from the commencement of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine. This might have led to discrimination and exclusion at Alex's school due to unfavourable views and preconceptions about Russian immigrants, particularly Alex. Alex and other Russian pupils may be subjected to an unfriendly and unwelcoming atmosphere at school. Alex's capacity to feel secure and included in the school community would have been negatively impacted regardless of the discrimination's overt or covert nature.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is a helpful lens that can be used to understand the complex factors contributing to the marginalisation of immigrant students like Alex. The theory emphasises the ecological systems' interconnected natures and interactions. By analysing the impacts of the macrosystem, exosystem, microsystem, and mesosystem, we can see how the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine may have led to increased societal discrimination and stress for Alex's family, language barriers and cultural differences, as well as conflicting messages and a lack of support at home and school. Because of these circumstances, it has probably been difficult for Alex to engage in and benefit from the school's atmosphere fully. This has likely led to feelings of isolation and marginalisation for Alex. When dealing with immigrant children, educators and other professionals need to consider the dynamic relationship between these systems. This will allow for improved support of the students' growth and integration into the school community.

## **6. To What Extent can We Help Alex to be More Resilient?**

Immigrant children like Alex may face unique challenges and stressors at school, such as cultural and linguistic restrictions, prejudice and marginalisation, and difficulties adjusting to a new educational system and culture [15]. Despite these challenges, immigrant students can demonstrate tenacity and achieve academic and personal success. Recognising that immigrant children may be experiencing problems is vital, and instructors can help them navigate these difficulties in a supportive manner.

Schools can help students like Alex become more resilient by providing a positive and encouraging learning environment. A safe and welcoming environment in which students feel valued and respected can provide students with a sense of security and stability, which is vital for their well-being and growth [5]. Furthermore, providing linguistic and cultural support might improve immigrant students' academic performance and social-emotional well-being [24]. Schools can also provide academic support and mentoring to help immigrant children overcome academic challenges, such as tutoring and extra help, and connect pupils with academic advisers [6].

Teachers also play an essential role in helping students like Alex develop resilience. A positive and supportive relationship with a teacher can provide guidance and encouragement to students [5]. Teachers can also educate pupils on stress management techniques and coping strategies [12]. They can also foster a culture of mutual respect, understanding, and empathy in their classes, making students feel more at ease and less lonely.

As Alex's teacher, I should implement more of these practices. I can prioritise building a positive relationship with Alex. I can provide him with a sense of security and stability, which is crucial for his well-being and growth, by getting to know him, learning about his history and experiences, and building trust (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). To ensure a healthy and supportive relationship between myself and Alex, I will create a safe space for open communication by allowing Alex to talk openly and honestly about problems and encourage him to participate

actively in classroom discussions and activities. Meanwhile, I will establish clear expectations, model acceptable behaviour, and regularly engage in positive reinforcement.

I should be more culturally aware of my teaching methods. This involves being aware of and sensitive to immigrant students' cultural origins and experiences, providing bilingual materials and resources, and allowing students to take notes in their home language during class. This can help Alex feel comfortable and secure at school [6].

I can also assist all students in developing a growth mindset. According to Yeager and Dweck (2012), students with a growth mindset are more resilient and better suited to deal with stress and problems. I will encourage my students to see problems as opportunities for growth and will provide positive feedback. I want to show students that hard work and learning may help them develop their abilities and intelligence.

Other students can assist Alex in becoming more resilient by creating a positive and supportive environment in the classroom. According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009), students who felt like they belonged at school performed better academically, had fewer behavioural issues, and were generally happier [16]. Alex's fellow students can encourage and support him while making him feel involved and valued. Other students can provide social assistance to students experiencing challenges by cultivating a feeling of community and belonging [24]. This sense of belonging can help Alex develop resilience, which is the ability to recover from failures in life and face hardship.

It is also worth noting that cultural and socioeconomic factors can influence a student's resilience. Students from low-income households or ethnic/racial minorities, according to research, may face additional stressors and difficulties, making them more vulnerable to adversity [12][15]. As a result, schools, teachers, and other students must be culturally attentive and understand and appreciate kids' cultural heritages, such as Alex's. These individuals and institutions may assist students in learning how to adapt to new conditions and get back on their feet when things go wrong. They can do so by creating a positive and supportive environment, providing students with the tools they require, teaching them skills and techniques for dealing with stress and adversity, promoting a growth mindset, providing an opportunity for students to accomplish activities outside of school, and being sensitive to diverse cultures.

## 7. Conclusion

In light of the continuing crisis between Russia and Ukraine, this case study focuses on the difficulties faced by Alex, a Russian immigrant student. By utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, it has been shown that Alex's experience is impacted by several interrelated systems, ranging from his immediate school environment to broader social attitudes towards Russian immigrants. His issues with mental health, academic achievement, and social integration highlight the complex realities faced by immigrant pupils adjusting to unfriendly circumstances.

The results highlight the pressing need for a more inclusive educational system that provides tailored interventions, social support, and cultural sensitivity to immigrant pupils, particularly those from conflict areas. Although Slovenia has made strides in inclusive education, many obstacles remain, such as a lack of funding, teacher training, and social bias. To solve these problems, communities, schools, and educators must cooperate to promote an inclusive environment where all students, regardless of background, have the chance to thrive.

Alex's story serves as an example of the resilience that immigrant students can develop in an empathetic and helpful educational setting. Students like Alex may flourish intellectually, socially, and emotionally in a more inclusive environment if we prioritise teacher development, increase resource allocation, and foster empathy and respect in the classroom. More study and ongoing attention to these challenges are essential to advancing inclusive practices that help all learners, especially those from marginalised and immigrant groups.

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