

VOLUNTEER TEACHERS' ACTIVITIES IN MIGRANT CAMPS: PSYCHOSO- CIAL IMPACT, PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND INSTITUTIONAL REACTION

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This study analyses how detention affected the psychosocial well-being of migrant children held in Lithuanian border camps during the 2021 migration crisis and how volunteer teachers' engagement functioned as a form of civic response to institutional neglect.

Methods. The study is based on qualitative research conducted with eight long-term volunteer teachers who worked with children in the Rukla detention camp. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed through inductive thematic analysis following the principles of qualitative rigour.

Results. The findings show that detention produced structural harm that intensified children's emotional distress, behavioural withdrawal and social isolation. Volunteer teachers became a stable source of emotional regulation, connection and meaningful activity, providing informal psychosocial support in the absence of institutional protection. Their role evolved from educational assistance to civic engagement, which challenged exclusionary state practices and contributed to practical changes such as increased access to learning and movement opportunities for children.

Conclusions. Detention policies create harmful environments for children even within EU member states that claim adherence to human rights. The study demonstrates that civil society initiatives may partially reduce institutional harm by creating alternative spaces of care and responsibility. Children's well-being in migration contexts cannot rely solely on legal frameworks; it requires ethical commitment and active public involvement.

Keywords: migrant children, detention, psychosocial well-being, volunteer teachers, civic engagement

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Lithuania faced an abrupt increase in irregular border crossings from Belarus, involving people primarily from Iraq, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. Although these individuals were seeking asylum in the European Union, the Lithuanian government framed the event not as a humanitarian situation but as a “hybrid attack” orchestrated by the Belarusian regime. In response, emergency legal measures were introduced, allowing the large-scale detention of asylum seekers in militarised camp settings. More than 4,000 people, including families with children, were placed in closed or semi-closed facilities surrounded by fences, surveillance and movement restrictions. Official discourse prioritised state security, while the human consequences of detention were excluded from public concern. This situation was part of a broader European shift towards deterrence-based migration control, where containment increasingly replaces protection (Amigoni, 2021).

Among those detained in Lithuania were hundreds of children who were held for months in confined spaces without access to formal education, psychological support or safe social environments. Research consistently shows that detention has a severe and lasting impact on children’s development, heightening anxiety, emotional withdrawal and behavioural disturbances (Deng et al., 2022). Experts agree that restrictive environments function as a form of chronic stress that disrupts a child’s sense of safety and attachment, with consequences comparable to other forms of institutional harm (Mesa-Vieira et al., 2022). Despite these well-documented risks, children in Lithuanian detention camps remained invisible in public policy debates, and no systematic measures were taken to protect their emotional well-being. The situation revealed a fundamental contradiction: although Lithuania is formally committed to international child protection standards, in practice detention policies produced structural harm.

Although research has documented the psychological consequences of forced displacement and war on children (Masten, 2014), less is known about the impact of host-country policies on children’s well-being during migration. Existing studies often focus on trauma experienced before arrival, while overlooking harm that occurs after entry into European states, especially in detention contexts (Silove et al., 2017). Moreover, most research treats children as passive recipients of policy decisions and pays limited attention to the social environments surrounding them, including the role of relationships, community support and everyday moral responses. In the Baltic region, empirical research on the psychosocial experiences of migrant children is almost non-existent, and no study to date has examined their experiences through the perspective of those who directly worked with them inside

detention camps. This study addresses this gap and examines how migrant children experienced life in detention in Lithuania and how volunteer teachers attempted to reduce the emotional and social harm resulting from restrictive state policies. The analysis focuses on the interactions between structural conditions, child well-being and civic action. The study addresses the following research questions: how did detention affect the psychosocial well-being of migrant children? What forms of support did volunteer teachers provide and how did these impact children's emotional resilience? In what ways did civic engagement challenge or influence institutional responses to the migration crisis?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Migration governance in Europe has increasingly shifted from protection-oriented approaches to strategies centred on control and deterrence. Recent research shows that detention has become a standard tool used at the EU's borders, especially in contexts where security concerns are prioritised over humanitarian obligations (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2021). These measures have a disproportionate impact on migrants with limited legal and social protection, including children (Deng et al., 2022). Detention functions not only as physical confinement but also as an administrative mechanism shaping access to rights, services and social visibility (Squire, 2023). In this environment, children's protection needs are often secondary to broader migration control goals.

A growing body of evidence shows that detention environments negatively affect children's psychological and social development. Recent studies report symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, emotional withdrawal and behavioural regression among children in restrictive settings (Daniel-Calveras et al., 2021). Limited mobility, constant surveillance and unpredictable routines reduce opportunities for learning, play and stable relationships—core conditions for healthy development (Soltan et al., 2022). European studies also document the social consequences of confinement, including isolation from peers and uncertainty about the future (Kadir, 2019; McIntyre et al., 2020). Although international organisations emphasise that detention contradicts the best interests of the child (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012), this practice remains in use across EU member states.

Recent literature emphasises that the harm experienced by children in detention settings is structural rather than incidental. Suffering emerges from institutional arrangements that limit access to safety, continuity and supportive relationships (Squire, 2023). These dynamics align with contemporary understandings of structural violence, where policies and organisational routines restrict the ability to meet basic developmental needs (Perocco, 2023). Detention regulates children's time, space and interactions, shaping their agency within systems they do not control. Hannah Arendt's (1963) insight

that harmful outcomes can arise from routine administrative processes remains relevant here and helps frame detention as a practice with predictable psychosocial effects.

Although the effects of detention on children are increasingly documented, far less is known about how informal actors respond to these conditions inside restrictive environments. Research shows that when institutional support is limited, civil society actors often step in to address children's practical and emotional needs (Ataç et al., 2024; Shutes et al., 2022). These activities are typically described as humanitarian, but recent studies also highlight their social and political implications, showing how everyday interactions may challenge exclusionary practices. However, existing literature rarely connects children's experiences of detention with the work of volunteers who interact with them daily. Studies tend to examine either detention policy or civic engagement separately, leaving limited understanding of how informal support functions inside institutional constraints. This study addresses this gap by analysing the role of volunteer teachers working with children in detention in Lithuania.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative instrumental case study design to explore the role and impact of volunteer teachers working with migrant children in the Rukla camps in Lithuania. An instrumental case study is appropriate when a specific case is examined not for its own sake, but to gain insight into a broader social phenomenon (Kekeya, 2021). In this study, the case of volunteer intervention in Rukla is used to illuminate wider questions about psychosocial support, civic engagement, and institutional responses in the context of instrumentalised migration.

A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, meaning-making processes and social actions within a complex real-world environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study follows an interpretivist epistemological position, assuming that social reality is co-constructed through interaction and that knowledge is context-dependent. This approach is well-suited to research addressing lived experience in socially and politically sensitive contexts, where standardised measurement tools are insufficient to capture human complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study also draws on principles of contextual inquiry (Yin, 2018), recognising that the case of Rukla cannot be separated from Lithuania's migration policies, geopolitical pressures at the EU–Belarus border, and the civic responses that emerged in reaction to institutional decisions. The research therefore examines not only individual experiences, but also the broader socio-political structures shaping them.

The study involved eight volunteer teachers who conducted regular educational and psychosocial activities with migrant children in the Rukla detention camps between 2021 and 2023. Purposeful sampling was applied to select participants who had direct

and sustained experience working in the camps, allowing for rich and contextually grounded accounts (Patton, 2015). Participants differed in age, professional background and length of volunteer engagement, which enabled diverse perspectives on the social, emotional and political dimensions of their work.

Participation criteria included: (a) a minimum of three months of volunteering in the Rukla camps, (b) direct interaction with migrant children, and (c) willingness to reflect on the psychosocial, social and institutional aspects of volunteering. The sample size was determined according to information power logic, meaning that a relatively small sample is adequate when cases are information-rich and relevant to the study aim (Malterud et al., 2016). In addition, data saturation was reached, as no new themes emerged after the eighth interview (Guest et al., 2006).

The data was collected using individual semi-structured interviews with eight long-term volunteer teachers who worked in the Rukla migrant camps. This method was selected because it allows examining personal experience and social meaning in depth while keeping a clear connection to the research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews focused not only on what volunteers did, but how they understood the impact of their actions on children, the camp environment and public institutions.

Interviews were conducted online *via Zoom*, which enabled safe participation and flexibility, as many volunteers worked in different regions of Lithuania or abroad at the time of data collection. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded with the participants' explicit consent. An interview guide was used to ensure thematic consistency, but participants were encouraged to elaborate freely and reflect on their experiences. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and identifying details were removed to ensure confidentiality. Following ethical guidelines, each participant was given a pseudonym.

The interviews were analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). This approach was chosen because it allows categories and meanings to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing predefined theory. First, all interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the material and identify initial meaning units related to experiences, emotions and actions described by the participants. These meaning units were then openly coded and grouped into preliminary categories.

During the second stage, similar codes were compared and merged, which led to the formation of three main analytical themes consistent with the research questions:

- the psychosocial impact of volunteer teachers on children in detention,
- the social and civic effects of volunteering, and
- institutional responses to volunteer initiatives.

Throughout the analysis, category definitions were refined to ensure clarity, and representative quotations were selected to illustrate how volunteers themselves described the impact of their work.

To maintain transparency in the analysis process, short analytic memos were written to track how codes developed into themes. A simple codebook was created to ensure internal consistency. The analysis focused on meaning rather than frequency, seeking to understand how volunteers interpreted their experiences and the wider situation in the camp context.

This study followed the ethical standards of social research and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were informed about the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, including consent for audio recording and the use of anonymised quotations.

Given the sensitivity of the research context, additional care was taken to avoid emotional distress. Participants were not asked to disclose personal trauma and could skip any questions they found uncomfortable. Confidentiality was strictly protected: all names were replaced with pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed during transcription. Audio files and transcripts were stored on a password-protected drive accessible only to the researcher. The study adhered to recognised ethical guidelines for research involving vulnerable groups (Tracy, 2010; Orb et al., 2001) and respected the dignity and autonomy of all participants.

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with the data and iterative coding cycles, which allowed themes to be grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher assumptions. Peer debriefing was used during the analysis stage to review emerging categories with a qualitative researcher not involved in the study, which strengthened analytical clarity.

Dependability was addressed through a transparent documentation process: decisions made during coding were recorded in analytic memos, and a simple audit trail was maintained to track category development. Confirmability was supported by reflexive notes in which the researcher examined her own position as a volunteer working in social justice contexts, in order to reduce bias. Transferability was facilitated through a detailed description of the research setting, participants, and context, which enables readers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

RESULTS

Loss of Safety and Human Dignity in Detention

Children's daily experiences in the detention camp were shaped by persistent insecurity, restricted movement and a lack of meaningful activities. Volunteers consistently described the environment as one that undermined children's sense of safety and dignity. Although officially labelled as a temporary accommodation centre, the camp

operated as a closed institutional setting with clear boundaries, surveillance and limited autonomy. These structural elements defined the children's routines and shaped their emotional states throughout their stay.

Volunteers repeatedly emphasised how the physical environment resembled detention more than accommodation. "Children used to call it a prison. They were behind a fence, watched, counted. They could not leave even to walk on grass. It was cruel" (Santa). Routine interactions were regulated through commands and permissions: "Everything was about permission—permission to move, to speak, to meet us. You start to see what long-term control does to a person, even a child" (Mintautas). The environment communicated constant surveillance and unpredictability, reinforcing children's vulnerability and limiting their ability to form stable expectations about the day.

Daily restrictions were accompanied by visible emotional consequences. Teachers noted that children became increasingly restless, withdrawn or volatile. Ieva described how prolonged confinement with limited sensory input led to rapid deterioration in concentration and emotional stability: "They were locked up for a long time in a very small area... I think they very quickly started sensory deprivation. Over time they could no longer concentrate, their emotions became very unstable." Children had few opportunities for unstructured play or exploration, and even outdoor time was fragmented and controlled. These constraints restricted their capacity to regulate emotions and to engage in developmentally typical activities.

The camp environment also shaped children's play, which often imitated institutional routines. According to Mintautas, "They were constantly playing 'arrest'—one child was the police officer, the others were lined up against the wall. It became a game." Such play illustrates how children internalised and rehearsed the power dynamics that surrounded them daily. It also signals how institutional settings can penetrate children's imaginative worlds, becoming a framework through which they make sense of uncertainty and control.

Teachers observed that, in these conditions, ordinary classroom activities took on a therapeutic and stabilising role. Because the environment lacked predictability, children responded strongly to moments of structure and attention. As one volunteer noted, "We saw that what they needed most was stability and some kind of normal routine. Even simple things—sitting together, reading—became important" (Delan). These activities offered emotional grounding and temporary relief from the tension of the camp. While volunteers could not alter the institutional framework, their consistent presence provided an alternative relational space where children could experience recognition, warmth and predictability.

Children's experiences in the detention centre show how structural restrictions, surveillance and uncertainty affected their emotional well-being and sense of agency. Their reactions—heightened vigilance, emotional instability, repetitive play and reliance on predictable interactions—reflect the broader psychosocial consequences of confine-

ment. This theme demonstrates how detention settings shape everyday life and reveals the gap between institutional claims of temporary accommodation and children's lived experiences of prolonged control.

Public Discourse and Civic Resistance: The Social Role of Volunteer Teachers

The interviews show that the activities of volunteer teachers in Rukla had a social dimension that extended beyond direct work with children. Their presence in the camp and their decision to speak publicly about what they witnessed challenged the dominant public narrative that framed migrants primarily as a security threat. Previous research confirms that during migration crises, public discourse often becomes polarised and securitised, reducing people on the move to risk categories rather than individuals (Buzan et al., 1998; Opiłowska, 2025). This tendency was strongly reflected in Lithuania during the EU–Belarus border crisis, and volunteers reported that they encountered both public hostility and misinformation about camp residents.

One of the central strategies volunteers used was sharing real human stories through social media. This was not only a communication choice but a deliberate act of narrative resistance. As one volunteer explained: “I posted photos on Instagram because otherwise nobody would believe what is happening. People only hear about ‘illegal migrants,’ not about children who draw, cry and wait. Real faces change how people think” (Themis).

By personalising migration and refusing to use dehumanising language, volunteers reframed migrants not as a faceless threat but as individuals with histories, families and emotions. This form of counter-narrative has been observed in other contexts where civil society actors challenge exclusionary policies (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Kleres, 2018). In this case, volunteers used everyday digital communication to disrupt social distance and invite empathy.

One of the main effects of this public engagement was that it mobilised micro-acts of solidarity. Many social media posts resulted in donations of food, clothes, hygiene products and school supplies. As another participant recalled: “People started writing to me: ‘How can we help? Can we bring shoes? Can we send toys? Can I come with you next time?’ So we used that energy and turned it into real help” (Ana).

This finding aligns with research on civic agency, which shows that moral action often begins with emotional engagement and moves toward collective responsibility (Jasper, 2018; Sunil et al., 2018). Solidarity, in this sense, was not an abstract value but a practical response grounded in relationships and direct action. Through consistent communication, volunteers built informal networks of support around the camp, gradually shifting parts of the public narrative from fear to ethical concern.

While the volunteers did not initially view their activities as political, their actions gradually developed characteristics of civic resistance to policies that normalised prolonged detention and the marginalisation of migrant families. Their engagement began with educational support but evolved into a public defence of human dignity. As one participant explained, “I wanted the children and families to see that not everyone in Lithuania thinks they deserve this. Somebody had to show a different Lithuania” (Ana).

This reflects what scholars describe as moral citizenship – when individuals act not because of formal political affiliation but out of ethical responsibility (Neveu, 2015). The volunteers’ actions demonstrate how solidarity can emerge as a reaction to institutional indifference, especially when state responses fail to protect vulnerable groups. Similar cases have been documented across Europe, where civil society actors intervene when legal frameworks are used to justify human exclusion (Ataç et al., 2024).

Public engagement was not limited to emotional storytelling. Volunteers actively challenged dominant discourse by naming the mechanisms of dehumanisation. They rejected terms such as “illegal migrants” and “hybrid weapon”, arguing that these labels erase individual identity. As one participant stated, “when people are called a ‘tool’ or a ‘weapon’, it becomes easier to justify anything done to them. Language can destroy empathy” (Viltė).

This aligns with research that shows how language shapes moral boundaries in public debate (van Dijk, 2015). By reframing the narrative, volunteers widened the space for public empathy and critical thought. Some even reported a shift within their own social circles, where individuals who were previously hostile to migrants revised their views after being exposed to personal stories rather than abstract security narratives.

However, civic engagement also came with social cost. Some volunteers were criticised or verbally attacked online. One participant described: “I was called a traitor, a puppet, a ‘useful idiot’. People said I was helping invaders. But that didn’t stop us; it only showed how much fear is produced by propaganda” (Themis).

This demonstrates how solidarity practices are contested in polarised contexts. Yet instead of withdrawing, the volunteers framed hostility as a further reason to stay active. Their involvement became an ethical stance, combining care for children with explicit refusal to accept dehumanisation as a social norm.

The testimonies also reveal that public communication was not an isolated activity but gradually developed into a community of shared responsibility. Volunteers connected parents, teachers, students, artists, psychologists and ordinary citizens who wanted to contribute. This informal network expanded organically and functioned as a parallel support system to institutional structures. Research on bottom-up civic mobilisation suggests that in times of social crisis, networks of care often emerge to defend vulnerable groups when state systems fail to do so (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). The case of Rukla reflects this pattern: civil society did not remain passive but assumed responsibility for humanitarian care, advocacy and public awareness.

Over time, the volunteers' activities moved beyond individual support and turned into a collective demand for accountability. Their public storytelling, media posts and community organising were not only acts of solidarity but also acts of public witnessing, giving visibility to human rights violations in the camps. By speaking about the conditions faced by children, volunteers challenged silence and forced the issue into the public conversation. Their work therefore served as a form of civic resistance—not through protest or confrontation, but through persistent ethical engagement and exposure of injustice.

However, public attention alone was insufficient. The escalation of concerns led volunteers to engage in direct dialogue with institutions, marking a shift from solidarity actions to civic advocacy. The next section examines how state institutions reacted when confronted with the volunteers' testimony and growing public support, and how these interactions influenced policy decisions during the migration crisis.

Institutional Reactions and Advocacy Outcomes

The interviews reveal that institutional responses to the situation in Rukla were delayed, fragmented and highly defensive. Volunteers reported that their initial attempts to communicate concerns through official channels were ignored. Requests to improve children's access to education, social activities and outdoor time were met with bureaucratic answers or redirected between institutions. This pattern reflects what migration researchers describe as policy inertia—a deliberate slowing of response to avoid political responsibility for humanitarian issues (Boswell & Geddes, 2011). As one volunteer put it, "at first, nobody wanted to take responsibility. The camp administration said it was not their decision, the ministry said it was the camp's internal matter. It was a circle of emails without answers" (Ieva).

The lack of institutional dialogue led volunteers to realise that informal educational support alone was not enough. As another participant observed, "we saw that playing with children was not going to change the system that locks them behind fences. So we had to speak. Silence would mean accepting it" (Themis). This shift from assistance to advocacy is consistent with findings that civil society actors often adopt political roles when institutional neglect threatens basic rights (Ataç et al., 2024). Communication with state representatives began only after volunteers drew public attention to the violations inside the camp through media and social networks.

Institutional engagement intensified only after public visibility increased. Volunteers were invited to a meeting at the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas), where they presented evidence of children's isolation and emotional deterioration. One participant recalled, "we brought drawings, we brought children's sentences, their words. That was our report, not statistics but reality" (Viltė). Following this, volunteers were also called to discussions with representatives from the Ministry of the Interior and the Depart-

ment of Migration. These meetings, however, were described by participants as “more about image management than solutions” (Ana). The institutional response was focused on controlling public perception rather than addressing the structural harm caused by detention conditions.

However, early meetings with institutions were described as defensive. Officials questioned the credibility of volunteers and attempted to control how information from the camps was portrayed. One participant said: “We were not treated as partners. We were treated as a problem that needs to be silenced” (Themis). Similar patterns of delegitimising civil initiatives have been observed in other countries where migration is framed as a security issue rather than a social one (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022).

Despite this resistance, advocacy resulted in a significant change: children were eventually allowed to leave the camp territory for activities. This decision, which came months after volunteers began raising concerns, marked an important shift in policy implementation. As one participant explained, “the most important political win was that children were finally allowed to literally step outside the fence” (Ieva). This was not simply a logistical change but a symbolic recognition of children’s rights and emotional needs.

The findings show that institutional change did not result from standard administrative processes but from persistent civic pressure. Volunteers combined practical help, public testimony and political advocacy, creating a form of everyday resistance that challenged state control over migrant lives. Their actions demonstrate that civil society can influence migration governance, even in contexts dominated by security discourse.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the psychosocial harm experienced by migrant children in the Rukla detention camps is not accidental but structurally produced. The distress described by children—loss of safety, emotional withdrawal, imitation of violence and intense need for attachment—reflects the effects of prolonged confinement rather than solely pre-migration trauma. Previous research confirms that detention policies, by design, restrict autonomy and disrupt emotional development (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Sidamon-Eristoff et al., 2022). This study extends this knowledge by demonstrating how harmful conditions are reproduced through administrative routines presented as “security measures”, such as movement restrictions, surveillance, and isolation from society. These procedures are consistent with what sociologists describe as forms of *structural violence*: harm embedded in systems that appear neutral but systematically disadvantage certain groups (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004). In the context of this study, structural violence was justified using migration control discourse, which normalised harm by framing it as necessary state protection.

While studies on migrant children often focus on trauma related to war, displacement or family separation (Soltan et al., 2022), less attention has been given to the harm caused by host countries themselves through detention and prolonged uncertainty. Research has acknowledged that immigration systems can become environments of chronic stress (Silove et al., 2022), yet few studies in Europe have empirically examined how this harm is produced in everyday institutional practices. This study contributes to this gap by showing how restrictions justified as “administrative procedures”—such as control of movement, surveillance and the absence of meaningful activity—directly intensify psychological distress. Rather than protecting children, institutional frameworks in Rukla reproduced conditions known to damage emotional development (Kleres, 2018). These findings challenge the assumption that reception systems in EU states automatically operate in the best interests of the child. Instead, the results demonstrate that child well-being can deteriorate inside state-managed systems, even when they are legally presented as humanitarian protection.

Another important contribution of this study is that it reveals how civic engagement emerged as a counterforce to institutional neglect. Previous research on migration governance tends to focus on state action and policy frameworks but pays less attention to the role of citizens in responding to injustice (Ataç et al., 2024). In this study, volunteer teachers did not frame their work as political, yet their actions took on political significance as they challenged the normalisation of detention as a response to migration. By building relationships, sharing testimonies and mobilising public support, they created what Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis S. Tsianos (2013) call “autonomous spaces of solidarity”—parallel structures of care that arise when formal systems fail. Rather than simply providing charitable help, their involvement contested exclusionary narratives and practices, showing that solidarity can also function as resistance when it defends human dignity against harmful state policy (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

This study contributes to academic debates in three ways. First, it empirically demonstrates that child harm in migration contexts is not limited to pre-migration trauma but is also produced by the host system itself, a phenomenon often acknowledged theoretically but rarely documented through qualitative field research in the EU (Silove, 2022). Second, it advances understanding of civil society involvement in migration governance, showing that volunteer-led initiatives can evolve from humanitarian support to civic advocacy when formal protection systems fail. This challenges approaches that treat citizens as passive observers of migration policy and positions them as active agents in shaping social justice responses (Jasper, 2018). Third, the findings highlight that informal, relational practices—trust-building, emotional presence, continuity—can serve as effective psychosocial support interventions in contexts where institutional help is absent. This expands existing knowledge that often prioritises formal mental health interventions and overlooks community-based forms of resilience (Masten, 2014).

The results have practical implications for child protection, education and migration governance. First, the findings show that psychosocial support cannot be treated as secondary assistance in migration contexts. Emotional safety and relational continuity must be recognised as fundamental needs rather than optional services, particularly for children in detention-like conditions. Second, the study illustrates that community-based support models are feasible and effective. The work of volunteer teachers demonstrates how stable relationships, meaningful daily activities and safe spaces can reduce distress even in restrictive settings. These practices could be integrated into national child protection strategies, not as charity but as part of rights-based policy design. Finally, the findings highlight the need for institutional accountability. Civic initiatives should not replace state responsibility, but they can reveal gaps in care and pressure institutions to uphold ethical and legal standards. Cooperation between state institutions and civil society should be reframed not as a threat to authority but as a democratic mechanism of social responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This study showed that the experiences of migrant children in the Rukla detention camp were shaped not only by their past displacement but by the conditions imposed by the host country. The findings revealed that volunteer teachers had a significant psychosocial impact: they offered continuity, emotional safety and meaningful interaction in an environment defined by control and deprivation. Their presence helped to counteract the effects of institutional isolation and sensory deprivation, demonstrating that stable human connection can reduce distress even in restrictive settings.

At the social level, the study found that the initiatives of volunteers extended beyond educational support and became a form of civic engagement. Through public testimony and communication, they contributed to a shift in public discourse by challenging depersonalising narratives about migrants. Their actions mobilised solidarity networks and encouraged members of society to participate in practical support. In this way, volunteering functioned not merely as assistance but as a socially transformative practice that contested the normalisation of exclusion.

The results also showed that civil action contributed to institutional change. Although state actors initially dismissed or minimised concerns, consistent civic pressure resulted in concrete outcomes, such as allowing children to leave the camp territory and take part in activities outside the fenced zone. This demonstrates that institutional practices are not fixed but can be altered when confronted with ethical responsibility and public accountability.

The study demonstrates that the harm experienced by migrant children in detention is structurally produced, yet it can be partially reduced by civic engagement. Volunteer-based initiatives do not replace state obligations but can reveal gaps in pro-

tection and serve as a catalyst for social responsibility. Children's rights in migration contexts cannot depend solely on legal frameworks; they require active participation from society. Ensuring dignity, safety and development for every child is not a question of charity but a fundamental responsibility of democratic systems.

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