

HERE's what we know about the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe

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Refugee Education UK



About the HERE Knowledge Base

The [HERE Knowledge Base](#) includes over a thousand academic and non-academic resources on refugee education from across Europe. The Knowledge Base is fully searchable and contains links to source materials.

Notes on contributors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities¹ in Europe presents a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive and intersectional approach. This report highlights these challenges and identifies where practices and approaches effectively ameliorate these, based on findings from a scoping review. It underscores the importance of recognising the diverse and compounded identities of refugee learners with disabilities, who face unique barriers that intersect across disability, migration, language, and socio-economic status. Overall, the report calls for a comprehensive and intersectional approach to inclusive education for refugees with disabilities, and highlights specific areas of focus for future research, policy, and practice to ensure that these learners receive the support they need and are entitled to, to thrive in their educational journeys.

Key points to take away

1. **Refugees with disabilities are a diverse and heterogeneous group.** Not only does the severity of their disability or difficulty differ, but so do factors such as their language skills, migration experiences, racialisation, legal status, family situation and indeed understanding of disability. In addition, as we have seen, gender can also play a part. As such, a broad analysis of all the factors which may shape each learner's learning trajectory should be undertaken, to gain a holistic understanding of the individual.
2. **Educational obstacles may not be 'refugee-specific' but may apply to all children with disabilities** (Steigmann, 2020); or, conversely, they may not be 'disability-specific' but may apply to all refugee learners (Eker et al., 2023). A lack of language and intercultural support, for example, as well as cultural differences and financial issues, exacerbates their experiences of educational exclusion.
3. **There is a significant gap in the research on the educational needs and experiences of refugee learners with disabilities**, which hinders the development of effective policies and practices tailored to their specific needs.

¹ In this report, we understand 'disability' to mean both physical disabilities and learning difficulties. We follow the social model, in acknowledging that disability is a social construct; and that it is characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment and a social environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not fit the social expectation of 'normalcy' (Hosking, 2008). In addition, while use of person-first and identity-first language is disputed within disability spaces, we have tended to use person-first language in this report to align with UN conventions. However, on occasion, we use identity-first language.

4. **An intersectional approach is incredibly important to understand the compounded challenges faced by refugees with disabilities.** This includes considering factors such as racialisation, language background and psychosocial needs, and how they may interact with and impact their educational experiences.
5. **There are significant issues with diagnosis and assessment of specific needs of refugee learners with disabilities,** including unclear procedures, a lack of coordination and cultural and linguistic barriers. This can lead to misdiagnosis and non-existent or delayed support, which exacerbates inclusion challenges.
6. **Refugee learners with disabilities often face social isolation, segregation and negative attitudes from peers, teachers, and the general public.** These challenges are exacerbated by their dual status as refugees and individuals with disabilities, leading to compounded discrimination.
7. **Families' views on disability and their capacity to support their children's education vary widely.** Language barriers, a lack of information and cultural differences can hinder their engagement with the education system. Empowering families from refugee backgrounds with knowledge and resources is essential for improving educational outcomes.

Recommendations for policy and practice

1. **Reframe the way we think about inclusion/inclusive education,** avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach which neglects learners' specific, additional support needs. For example, consider developing an approach to 'multicultural special needs' or 'multicultural diversity' (Samsari et al., 2024) or creating frameworks and procedures for supporting 'disabled migrant' and/or 'multiply marginalised' students (Migliarini, 2020). This would involve thinking about multiple forms of marginalisation and how they intersect and overlap.
2. Related to the above, **improve SEN and disability assessment procedures for newly arriving learners** to account for potentially having a non-majority language background and the impacts of flight on socio-emotional well-being, for example. These assessments should also focus on areas of proficiency, rather than only deficit, when they are 'scored' (Dovigo, 2019). Making such changes should also help to improve refugee learners' and their families' trust of assessment procedures and encourage them to continue attending.

3. Invest in **robust and structured teacher training and ongoing professional development programmes** which cover transculturality, disability and linguistic diversity. This training should equip teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to support refugee learners with disabilities effectively.
4. Provide **comprehensive support for families**, including translation and counselling services, information on available resources and opportunities for engagement with the education system. This support should empower families to advocate for their children's needs.
5. Foster **collaboration and coordination among educational, health and social services** to provide holistic support for refugee learners with disabilities. This includes establishing clear standards and mechanisms for disability assistance and ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the support process.
6. Establish **inclusive educational practices which recognise the diversity of the student population and their educational biographies and related interruptions so far**. This includes designing intercultural curricula, using supportive materials such as visual aids, potentially providing multilingual education and creating supportive and accepting school environments.

Recommendations for researchers²

1. Similar to the recommendation for practitioners above, **incorporate an intersectional lens** which acknowledges and investigates how learners' identities may overlap, leading to multiplied forms of marginalisation (e.g. Bešić et al., 2018b). Uncover how this is experienced and (can be) addressed in policy and practice from the institutional to the (inter)national level.
2. **Include refugees with disabilities themselves in research** – and not only as participants, which is already rare in education, but also throughout the process, from design to dissemination (dependent on their interest). There is a growing literature on the use of creative methodologies, for example, to support the participation of those traditionally excluded from the research process – including young refugees and marginalised people with disabilities (Hayes, 2021; Hunt, 2023; Shaw & Wickenden, 2024; Treco & Jordan, 2024).

² See Box 1 on p. 38 for a detailed list of suggested research questions based on findings from this review.

3. Related to this, **conduct and support more enquiry into learners' own experiences**, from their own perspectives, using accessible (and) participatory methods and spaces (Bešić et al., 2018b; Migliarini, 2020).
4. Conduct **longitudinal studies** which track the educational trajectories of these learners and identify effective interventions (Migliarini, 2017).

INTRODUCTION

Disabled forced migrants, Pisani and Grech (2015) argue, live in a shadow: they are rarely considered in humanitarian intervention, hardly theorised in forced migration studies and are mostly left out of Global North-centric disability studies. As this analysis found, this intersection of their marginalised identities – being both a forced migrant and living with a disability – is also concerning rarely considered in educational contexts in Europe.

In fact, we searched the 1,007 resources currently held in the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE) **Knowledge Base**, and found that *just 17 studies* discuss the needs, outcomes and/or experiences of this multiply marginalised population. In what follows, we look at the research which *is* available and what we can learn from it, before offering some recommendations for research, policy and practice. In exploring this topic, we respond to calls from Critical Disability Studies scholars to undertake intersectional analyses of disability: to recognise that “the politics of disability are intertwined with many other politics including those associated with racism, sexism, transphobia, occidentalism, colonialism, classism, developmentalism and heterosexism” (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 989). At the same time, we build on Critical Race Studies and the forced migration and education literature, in developing our understanding of such intersectional experiences.

Migration theory grows without the disabled person, disability studies without the migrant, and practice without the disabled migrant.

(Pisani & Grech, 2015, p. 421)

Why the need for an intersectional approach?

Often, as we will see below, refugees and learners with disabilities are treated as separate ‘vulnerable’ or ‘high risk’ groups who are subject to inclusion measures (González-García et al., 2017; Samsari et al., 2024). This means that attention is not paid to the specific needs of those who fall into *both* categories. But why is it important to study this intersection, rather than taking these aspects of their experience separately?

The reason is that such aspects can multiply an individual’s challenges. For example, previous research from Greece has found that students with special educational needs and/or disabilities from ‘different’ ethnic backgrounds suffered from physical, verbal, social and cyber bullying, as the co-presence of their ‘different’ ethnicity and disability status made them ‘stand out’ – putting them at a higher risk of being bullied (Samsari et al., 2024). This was on top of the potential discrimination they might have already faced as students moving to a new country.

Administrative procedures also neglect the fact that refugee and migrant students come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and may have experienced traumatic events. By not taking an intersectional approach, refugees are assessed according to a 'norm'. This means that when they come from a different language background to the majority population (especially in schools), they may be subjected to developmental assessments which are designed for monolingual populations and which do not take into account background information such as their interrupted schooling, trauma and socio-emotional well-being (Hertel et al., 2021). As a result, multilingual children such as refugees may be misdiagnosed or overdiagnosed with developmental language disorders. Similarly, Dovigo (2019) has noted that the diagnostic screening model followed by schools and health and social services for newly arriving minors in Italy focuses on separated parts of the individual. This fragmented approach, performed by a variety of actors, lacks coordination and also neglects the whole child and important aspects of their migration experience. They and their families may even be assumed to have 'cognitive impairments' if they struggle to follow the technical vocabulary used in meetings with schools and other practitioners (Dovigo, 2019).

Therefore, it is vital to not only investigate how exactly refugees with disabilities experience education as a refugee *or* as a learner with a disability, but also how racialisation, language background and psychosocial needs, for example, are accounted for during diagnostic procedures and when providing special educational support. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate the *compound* impacts of these aspects of learners' identities – or what Walton et al. (2020) term 'compounded exclusion'. While referring to the Sub-Saharan African context, from this review, it appears that this mirrors what we are seeing in Europe: that despite inclusion policies and commitments to supporting access to education at all levels, neither disabled citizens nor non-disabled refugees are being adequately catered for – meaning that disabled refugees are even more likely to be excluded.

With this said, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties in carrying out such research. For example, scholars across Europe have noted a lack of accurate data at national levels on the number of learners with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds (Samsari et al., 2024) – and the fact that refugees specifically suffer from "prolonged invisibility" within official educational paths, due to a lack of resources and systematic inclusion measures (Dovigo, 2019, p. 171). Furthermore, there are challenges with determining the presence of the disability or learning difficulty itself. For migrant learners, some may have an official diagnosis from the new country, whereas others' disabilities may be based on parents' "assertion or consent" (Samsari et al., 2024, p. 3). Still others' families may not want to acknowledge the disability due to stigma or prior cultural associations (Adams & Santos, 2022; Daudji et al., 2011).

Searching the HERE Knowledge Base: defining 'disability'

One issue at the outset of this analysis was defining 'disability', due to the variety of terms used in English across Europe, how they are translated from their original languages, and what exactly each term encapsulates. For example, in Italy, 'special needs' could refer to any additional needs such as requiring psychosocial support (Dovigo, 2019). However, in the UK context, Special Educational Needs (SEN) is associated with disability: being defined in the Children and Families Act 2014 as provisions made for a child who "has a learning difficulty or disability" (CCLC, 2024). 'Disability', in this case, according to the Equality Act 2010, refers to "a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities". A child is defined as having a 'learning difficulty' if they have a "significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age". Some examples of disabilities and difficulties given are autism, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, learning difficulties such as dyslexia, communication difficulties, medical needs (such as epilepsy) and mobility difficulties.

In line with the Critical Disability Studies approach, here we follow the social model of disability (rather than moral, medical or rehabilitative) which recognises that "(1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment, (2) disability is best characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal (together, the 'social') environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of 'normalcy'" (Hosking, 2008, p. 5).

To try to capture this diversity of experience and understanding across Europe, we therefore used the terms 'disability/ies', 'special education', 'special need/s', 'learning difficulty/ies' and 'additional needs' to search the HERE Knowledge Base.

THE RESEARCH LANDSCAPE: REFUGEE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN EUROPE

A concerning and extraordinary gap

As of November 2024, there were 1,007 resources on refugee education in Europe in the HERE Knowledge Base. These resources, published since 2015, were curated according to a systematic process (Aleghfeli et al., 2023). The current review sought to uncover all of those which provide *empirical data on refugee learners with physical and/or learning disabilities*.

However, a search of the titles, abstracts and keywords in the Knowledge Base highlighted a worryingly substantial gap in the literature on this topic. The term 'disab*' returned only 27 results, for example, of which 12 were irrelevant. The search term 'special needs' then returned 4 results, of which 2 were irrelevant and 2 were duplications. A search for 'learning difficult*' returned 3 results – none of which were relevant (for example, 2 used 'learning difficulties' to mean more general challenges with following an educational programme, such as young refugees' poor accommodation conditions). The term 'additional needs' returned 0 results. Nineteen studies were labelled with 'special education' under Education Type, but of these, only 2 were relevant. Reasons for studies to be excluded from the analysis were the fact that they treated refugee and disabled learners as distinct groups (e.g. Mezzanotte, 2022), or they mentioned SEN only to highlight the research gap on this topic (O'Higgins, 2018).

This means that there are currently a total of only 17 resources in the Knowledge Base published over almost the last decade which provide empirical data on refugee learners with physical and/or learning disabilities. Most of these specifically sought to explore their educational and social inclusion needs and challenges – with the majority doing so via teachers' or parents' perspectives (Bhatti et al., 2024; Çakiray, 2024; Eker et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2019; Giavrimis, 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Koukou et al., 2024; Migliarini 2017; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Two resources focused on rights and policies on inclusive education for refugees with disabilities and how they have been implemented (Bacakova, 2023; Steigmann, 2020), while another 2 reported findings from 'sister' studies on the general public's attitudes towards the inclusion of refugee boys and girls with(out) disabilities (Bešić et al., 2018a; 2018b).

The included studies were published as journal articles (12), book chapters (2), PhD theses (2) and a report (1) between 2017 and 2024. The full text of one study (Çakiray, 2024) could not be accessed as it is under embargo until August 2025, and so data was extracted from its detailed abstract. The study locations are illustrated in Figure 1 below. One study (Bacakova, 2023) looked at rights covering all European countries.

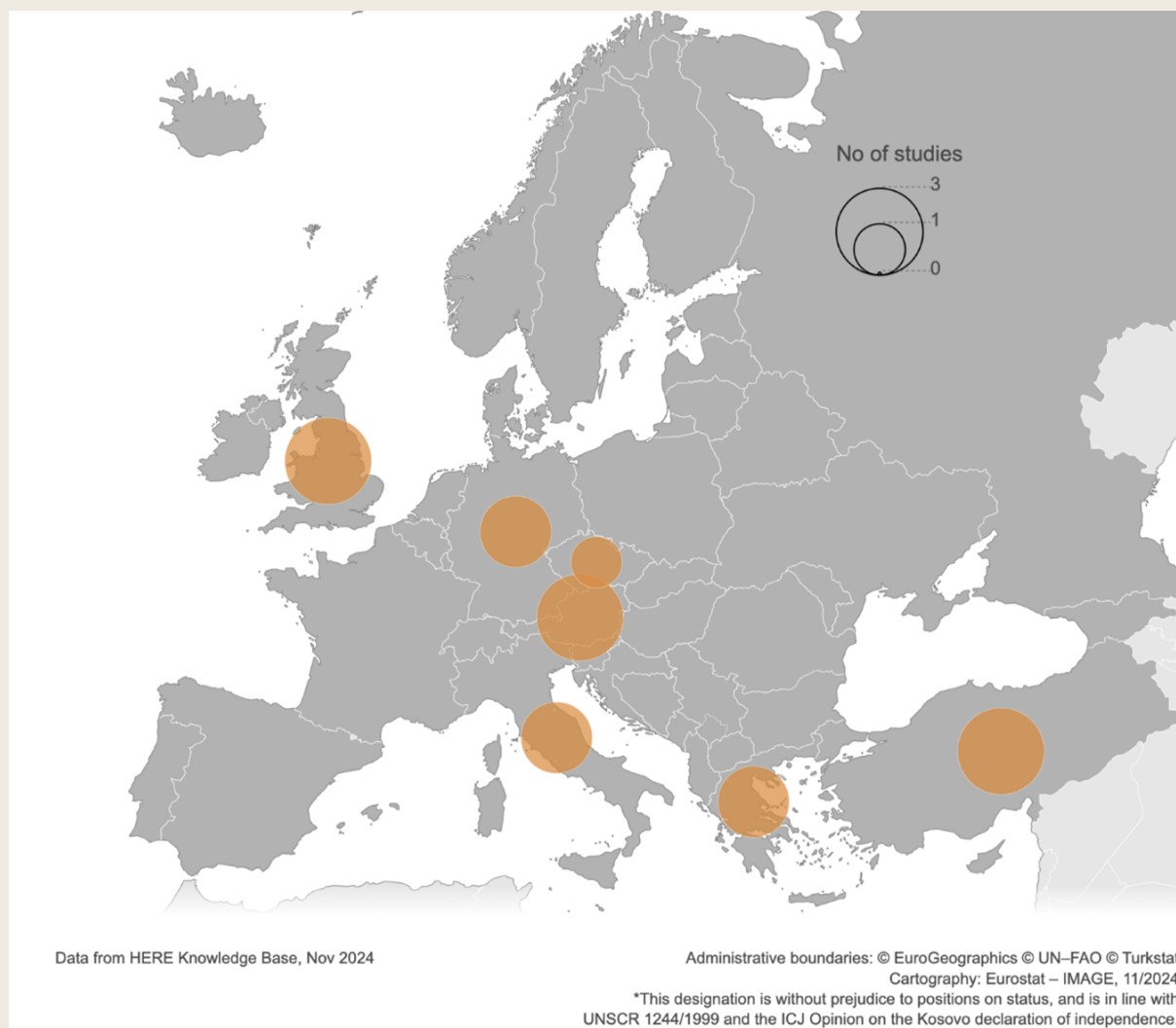


Figure 1. Research on refugee learners with disabilities in Europe: study locations

Methods, theories and concepts used

Methods used in the 17 included studies were varied. Most used interviews (13 studies), but also policy and/or document analysis (3), vignette surveys (2), observations (2), participatory action research (2) and focus group discussions (1). Where interviews were conducted, the majority were held with teachers or teaching assistants (6 studies). Otherwise, they involved parents (4 studies), social workers or refugee support workers (3), integration centre staff (1), educational experts including academics (2), SEN coordinators (1), school authorities (1) and health professionals (1). Only 4 studies involved young refugees with disabilities as participants: with 3

being interview-based (Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Migliarini, 2017), and the other being based around Krip-Hop-informed workshops (Migliarini, 2020).

The theoretical approaches and frameworks used were also diverse, but all point towards a new way of imagining inclusion. Some studies explicitly used an intersectional lens (Bacakova, 2023; Bešić et al., 2018a; 2018b; Giavrimis, 2023; Migliarini, 2017; 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021), with Istif Inci et al. (2024, p. 1) also referring to the specific "nexus of disability-migration-education". However, only the two articles by Bešić et al. cite Crenshaw (1989) as the scholar who formulated the concept of intersectionality to describe how belonging to two or more subordinated groups can aggravate and intensify prejudice and discrimination. For this reason, the authors include gender in their analysis as well as refugee status and disability. Other frameworks included Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) (Migliarini, 2017; 2020); human rights and every learner's right to (inclusive) education (Bacaokva, 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Steigmann, 2020); Kohli's 'resumption of an ordinary life' theory (Eker et al., 2023); conflict and neo-Marxist theories (Giavrimis, 2023); Hip-Hop pedagogy and the principles of the Krip-Hop movement (Migliarini, 2020); Butler's notions of subjectivation and performative politics (Migliarini, 2017); and intercultural education and inclusion in its broader sense (Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Koukou et al., 2024).

Authors described refugees with disabilities as a 'shadow population' (Istif Inci et al., 2024), 'vulnerable' (Bacakova, 2023), 'twice a minority' (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023), 'multiple disadvantaged' (Bešić et al., 2018a), 'multiply marginalized' (Migliarini, 2020) and 'doubly disadvantaged' (Bhatti et al., 2024), or more neutrally as having a 'dual identity' (Giavrimis, 2023) – even if it was noted that it was an intersection of "two negatively constructed attributes" (p. 242).

Which disabilities do the included studies cover?

Not all of the studies specified the particular disabilities or learning difficulties of the participants or groups in question (e.g. Bešić et al., 2018a; Bacakova, 2023), or indeed provided a definition of disability. Where definitions were given, they mostly explicitly followed the social model of disability (rather than moral, medical or charity) – i.e. adhering to the view that contemporary social organisation excludes persons with impairments (Giavrimis, 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Steigmann, 2020). Steigmann locates the social model within the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), in its statement that disability results from the interaction of persons with impairments with environmental barriers, and notes how inclusive education is indeed *for* (or was born out of support for) persons with disabilities.

Some studies mentioned the substantial range of needs of refugee children with disabilities, for example in terms of "severity and ... impact on the child's access to the curriculum" (Elliott et al., 2019, p. 38). While Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD),

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome and unspecified 'physical disabilities' were reported, it was noted that some conditions, such as cerebral palsy, were more common among some groups (Elliott et al., 2019). Klopota and Klopota (2024, p. 250) combined various disorders and difficulties under the term "psychophysical development", which referred to "disorders of the autistic spectrum; Down syndrome; impaired vision and hearing; delayed mental development; speech disorders; infantile cerebral palsy, and combined disorders". Bešić et al. (2018b), for their part, divided these into 'physical' and 'behavioural' disabilities. Some studies concentrated on 'developmental disabilities', which meant children with 'intellectual disabilities' and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023); while others referred to the physical impacts of war, such as limb loss (Eker et al., 2023, p. 547), and other physical disabilities such as vision and hearing loss or impairment (Istif Inci et al., 2024). Eker et al. (2023, p. 547) also noted the "mental disabilities" caused by war, such as the impacts of witnessing traumatising events. Migliarini (2020, p. 316), too, defined disabled youth as those with both "learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders". This overlap between disability and psychosocial health is discussed further below, in the section '*The relationship between SEN and PSS*'.

Limitations of the included studies

In terms of limitations, several of the included studies focus on the views of teachers and/or integration workers (e.g. Elliott et al., 2019; Jäger et al., 2021), rather than the perspectives and needs of parents and – even more importantly – refugees with disabilities themselves (Steigmann, 2020). Worryingly, however, in one study where refugee youth were included, it was admitted that in some cases they were "not previously informed by the professionals in the center about the interview, and so they were 'forced' to give their assent on the day of the interview" (Migliarini, 2017, p. 223). This raises important questions around informed consent, and especially ensuring that information is understood by participant groups who are diverse in terms of language, culture, age, previous education and disability.

Another common limitation is that where refugee youth, parents or key workers were included, the studies drew on the experiences of a limited sample (Elliott et al., 2019; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Migliarini, 2017), or structured interviews were used, meaning that the resulting data was limited (Eker et al., 2023). Furthermore, the majority of parents who took part were mothers; and as Eker et al. (2023, p. 557) note, "fathers may express different challenges". In addition, in this study, data was collected in a city with a large population of Syrian refugee children, and findings may differ where there is a smaller population. Other authors called for more studies in other European countries (Klopota & Klopota, 2024), and for more quantitative studies (Eker et al., 2023).

In addition, one issue is the studies' lack of data on how exactly learners' experiences were shaped by *both* their forced migration background and their disability – despite aiming to address this intersection. For example, Migliarini (2020) gives just two examples of lyrics written by a “young disabled migrant, who has been labeled as having behavioral issues in school” (p. 318) and “another young asylum-seeking teen with dyslexia” (p. 320). However, these excerpts focus on their identities as young (Black) migrants, rather than how their experiences were shaped by disability or learning difficulties.

Another limitation, in Bešić et al. (2018a; 2018b) is that they did not necessarily test attitudes towards *refugees*, specifically, but rather towards learners with limited local language abilities. The vignettes provided to participants in both of the ‘sister’ studies combined the two variables, meaning that no conclusions could be drawn about which variable was associated with either positive or negative attitudes. Furthermore, they were not able to examine the reasons underlying the public's attitudes. Klopota and Klopota (2024), too, report that they did not cover all relevant issues connected to the inclusion of refugee learners with SEN.

How else does ‘disability’ appear in the Knowledge Base?

Of the excluded resources, 8 were excluded as they treated refugee-background learners and learners with disabilities as separate groups, without discussing how these aspects may overlap (Ballam et al., 2017; González-García et al., 2017; Hertel et al., 2021; Hutchinson & Reader, 2021; Kesik & Beycioglu, 2022; Kioupi et al., 2023; Mezzanotte, 2022; Poleschuk et al. 2023). In these cases, learners' migration background and disability status separately made them ‘vulnerable’ (González-García et al., 2017) or part of a ‘special group’; albeit one which itself is heterogeneous (Samsari et al., 2024). Hertel et al. (2021), for example, discuss the practice of language testing in Germany to determine any ‘special needs’, and include refugee students and those with developmental language disorders as distinct groups. For some studies, this was due to having a broader focus on inclusive education, and so paying attention to various groups at risk of exclusion (e.g. Kesik & Beycioglu, 2022).

Two further studies reported on the experiences of students with disabilities from ‘different ethnic backgrounds’ (Samsari et al., 2024) and from schools where the majority of students had a migration background and a substantial number had disabilities (Poleschuk et al., 2023), but neither specified whether the resulting data referred to learners with a *forced migration* background specifically.

REVIEW FINDINGS

A right to *inclusive* education?

In terms of education, two articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly relate to education and can be read in the sense of inclusive education (for example, in saying that education should be freely available and accessible for all young people) (Elliott et al., 2019; Steigmann, 2020). In addition, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Qualification Directive and the Reception Directive (for receiving asylum applicants) are all relevant. However, while these documents lay out the right to education, including for refugees with disabilities, this is not the same as the right to *inclusive* education. Indeed, no human rights treaty protected the right to inclusive education until the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) entered into force in 2008 (Bacakova, 2023; Steigmann, 2020). This remains the only legal basis for inclusive education for refugees with disabilities, as it applies to all persons regardless of legal status or nationality (Bacakova, 2023). The UNCRPD also lays out the required features of inclusive education systems, such as non-exclusion, available support and trained staff, along with reasonable accommodations to be made.

While these documents lay out the right to education, including for refugees with disabilities, this is not the same as the right to *inclusive* education.

(Steigmann, 2020)

Despite having this “relatively high legal protection”, the right to inclusive education of refugees with disabilities has not been satisfactorily implemented; and indeed, Bacakova (2023) argues that this subject has been neglected by the CRPD Committee themselves, despite increasing references to intersectionality in their concluding observations over the last 5 years. According to Bacakova, this means that disabled refugee learners continue to face challenges in terms of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of education. In Germany, Steigmann (2020, p. 1) goes further, in claiming that the human right to inclusive education for *any* person with disabilities is “far from being fully and adequately implemented”.

Conceptual and policy-level challenges

Problematizing models of inclusive education

Beyond enacting rights, a key challenge is the definition of inclusive education in policy and how it is modelled. The term 'inclusive education' itself was first used to refer to the integration of students with disabilities into regular classrooms (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011). However, as school communities have become more diverse, it has come to encapsulate cultural, linguistic and other forms of diversity. Migliarini (2020) argues that the definition of inclusive education itself which underpins such educational policy in Italy – from the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education – is problematic. Bringing together previous criticisms, Migliarini states that this is because it constructs difference according to within-child deficits, and neglects how disability intersects with race, gender, class and migratory status to multiply oppressions. Furthermore, inclusion is linked to learning majority languages such as Italian, French and English, and being able to follow a Eurocentric curriculum. Together, this means that the individual forms of support offered operate separately, in an approach which “harms and further oppresses marginalized students” (Migliarini, 2020, p. 309).

Disabled refugees' access to education – including higher education – depends on policymakers' understanding of the 'disability-migration nexus' (Istif Inci et al., 2024). By this, Istif Inci et al. mean, for example, that “when situated in the context of displacement, approaching disability solely as a medical health issue or a humanitarian problem leads to a dependency-based hierarchical and marginalising approach, which impedes the impact of policies aiming at independent access to rights and further self-realisation” (pp. 12-13). This is, if there are any (substantial) political efforts in terms of including anyone of a forced migration background at all (Subasi Singh et al., 2021).

‘One size fits all’ vs a ‘double focus’

Some systems and institutions around Europe can be said to take a ‘one size fits all’ approach to inclusion, while others keep policies on special education separate from those on refugee learners. In one example of a ‘one size fits all’ approach, Ukrainians who moved to the Czech Republic before the war have been treated the same as those who fled it, without taking into account the fact that experiencing war has “increased the existing problems of children with SEN, led to the appearance of additional disorders, [and] reduced adaptive capabilities” (Klopota & Klopota, p. 253). Similarly, Bhatti et al. (2024) found that schools in the UK treated migrant children with SEN as a homogeneous group, and did not take into account differences in their national, cultural and educational backgrounds. Few policy documents addressed the specific context of disabled refugee children – meaning that “what ‘inclusion’ looks like in practice is open

to question and debate” (Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 128). This could be related to the fact that support for refugees entering the UK has been devolved to local governments and their individual reception and integration initiatives (Elliott et al., 2019). As a result, different practices are followed across each UK jurisdiction.

On the other hand, in Italy, policies and provisions related to inclusive education are said to maintain a “double focus”: keeping “disability and special educational needs issues” separate from the “questions of culturally diverse background”, or what may broadly be termed intercultural education (Migliarini, 2017, p. 35). While actions promoting the inclusion of refugee students have been debated and developed over recent years, this has mostly occurred in parallel with specific measures supporting learners with disabilities. For example, in 2022, a programme of actions to promote Ukrainian students’ educational inclusion was developed (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). Prior to this, in 2015, intercultural educational structures known as ‘Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education’ (DYEP) were established in Greece in response to increased migration flows, with introductory classes created for newcomers to gradually include them in the public school system (Giavrimis, 2023). However, while such initiatives address newcomers’ linguistic challenges, primarily, they do not take into account how their needs may overlap with those of students with disabilities (Koukou et al., 2024).

In Austria, too, Subasi Singh et al. (2021) lament the fact that educational experts have little understanding or awareness of how disability and forced migration intersect in the school context, and that this intersection is rarely even acknowledged. A child’s migration background may be referenced more often than their disability, which could be interpreted as 1) having limited experience or awareness of the interaction of these two dimensions, or 2) that their migration status is considered more important.

Issues with diagnosing SEN/disability

Unclear and slow assessment procedures

Jäger et al. (2021, p. 12) found that newly arriving refugee students in Germany were assigned to schools and needs-assessed for “relevant limitations, mental disabilities, social disorders, or learning disabilities” according to ad hoc procedures. Practices varied widely, with some Communal Integration Centers (CICs) adhering more closely to guidelines than others, but none using standardised instruments – instead choosing to use their own approaches or relying on their ‘gut feeling’ about learners’ needs. In some cases, this was because suitable instruments were not available or were not considered by staff to be meaningful or appropriate (for example, when working with non-German language speakers). This meant that newly arriving refugee children’s school careers were largely dependent on the staff member they were assigned to, and that many disabilities remained largely undetected – especially as parents often could not

provide documents describing previous diagnoses. In addition, CIC staff reported that “in contrast to physical disabilities, mental issues are often less obvious” (p. 13), and even when they were suspected, they lacked the personal and professional competences to take further steps to diagnose issues or refer the young person for support. Therefore, such issues mostly only became apparent over time, and the learner did not immediately receive resources to promote their inclusion.

In Austria, Subasi Singh et al. (2021) argue that the definition of SEN itself is unclear in the Schooling Act, leaving it open to interpretation. They reported it to be a challenge to distinguish disability from behavioural issues, with the additional question of how psychological difficulties are considered during assessments. In Greece, too, assessment procedures are still argued to be rooted in the medical model of disability and to take an ableist approach which does not account for learners’ specific characteristics (Giavrimis, 2023).

Coupled with this is the fact that refugee children and young people with disabilities may not have had a diagnosis or needs assessment in their home country; and their need may only have become evident after arrival in the new country (Elliott et al., 2019). Schools might also lack information about the child’s educational history and even chronological age (Elliott et al., 2019). If a child’s disability was previously recognised, their status may not be legalised in the new country, as foreign medical documents and development plans cannot be equated (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). In this case, “learning disabilities and mental or social disorders” cannot be detected; that is, if a diagnosis has taken place at all in the home country (Jäger, 2021, p. 17).

The age at the time of receiving SEN status is pivotal; as the later students arrive, the more challenging the situation can become (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). In the Czech system, the biggest concern for refugees was the length of time it took to prepare documents to legalise a young person’s educational and social status (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). This is complicated by the fact that in countries such as Northern Ireland, having a child’s needs appropriately identified by statutory services requires families to submit sufficient supporting information – and they can struggle to do so, due to the language barrier and lack of awareness of these processes (Elliott et al., 2019). Indeed, in the UK, Bhatti et al. (2024) report that parents are often simply excluded from professionals’ conversations between each other and the children in question. Parents in Austria complained about the length of time it took to complete assessments and receive diagnoses – and especially as to gain SEN status, pupils must first ‘fail’ in the school system (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Some impatiently awaited a diagnosis and welcomed it as it meant access to better support – as well as potentially being ‘redemptive’ and an ‘opportunity’ (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). However, other parents were concerned about the long-term effects of a “wrong educational decision” – particularly in terms of school selection (Subasi Singh et al., 2021, p. 16). Migliarini (2017, p. 177) argues that any such labelling of refugee youth as having SEN may constitute a ‘disablement’ process conducted by White Italian professionals which can have “significant consequences on [their] educational, social and personal lives”.

The term ‘special needs’ is also used to categorise refugees into vulnerable subgroups – along with ‘unaccompanied children’, ‘single parents’ and ‘the elderly’, among other labels –

which can afford them additional protection or support (Istif Inci et al., 2024). However, forced migrants' applications for disability status and support may be considered "inauthentic", as they are believed to be a way to obtain welfare benefits from the state (Migliarini, 2017). Even if accepted, in countries such as Türkiye, there are no specific conditions for refugee children with disabilities to access services such as public education and healthcare (Istif Inci et al., 2024).

Refugees and SEN: over-representation and 'race concealment'

In the Italian education system, all students, where possible, should be included in mainstream classrooms (Migliarini, 2020). Additional support is then provided under SEN provision, which divides learners into 3 tiered categories: "children with severe physical or intellectual impairments"; "children with learning difficulties certified by public or private clinical diagnosis"; and "students with cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic disadvantage without certified medical diagnosis but still requiring support" (D'Alessio, 2014, cited in Migliarini, 2020, p. 310). In Italy, migrant students are therefore mostly included under this third category – and indeed the macro-category of SEN was created by the Italian Ministry of Public Education in 2012 following the increase in numbers of migrant students. This means that they are of course overrepresented in SEN, which Migliarini associates with processes of 'race concealment' or a 'colour-evasive ideology' (drawing from Annamma et al., 2016) – meaning a refusal to acknowledge race, racism and ableism as normalising and interdependent processes. For Migliarini, this stems from migrant and refugee students not being seen as 'the norm', and their 'other' ways of expressing themselves via different languages and literacies not being recognised. They are seen as 'problems', which leads to labelling and segregation in the name of remedial learning (Migliarini, 2020).

Elsewhere, it has also been found that diagnosis of SEN is hindered at the outset by cultural and linguistic barriers (Subasi Singh et al., 2021), as well as the influence of "psychological trauma" (Koukou et al., 2024, p. 125). In Northern Ireland, Elliott et al. (2019, p. 53) admit that "patchy access to education" and exposure to traumatic events in the home country "might present as SEN on enrolment"; while Subasi Singh et al. (2021, p. 1) note that war does, of course, "increase the risk of developing a disability". However, Bhatti et al. (2024, p. 133) observe that in the UK, refugee children with limited English proficiency (but without special needs) can be misplaced in the SEN category, which they describe as "inappropriate and unhelpful". Teachers in Türkiye also reported that they believed many of their students had ended up being misdiagnosed (Eker et al., 2023). Similarly, in England, one study reported that children were "all too easily misplaced in SEND groups on the grounds of linguistic difficulties that were never fully explored" (Bhatti et al., 2024, p.135). 'School-based experts' in Austria also raised concerns about the connection between SEN and language or forced migration background (Subasi Singh et al., 2021); and indeed, teachers in Northern Ireland admitted to using the speed of English acquisition as an indicator of SEN (Elliott et al., 2019). Beyond language, however, during these

assessments some students may be “struggling with reading and comprehension based on knowledge outside their own experience” (Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 135).

Bešić et al. (2018b), however, describe the SEN label as a positive – saying that it means learners are more ‘visible’ and more likely to receive needed resources. Schools, too, may receive subsidies – but this can make them more eager to initiate the determination of SEN as soon as possible, even though they may not have adequately qualified teachers to accommodate children with disabilities (Steigmann, 2020). This time pressure can also lead to false diagnoses, and especially when families have just arrived and need time to learn the local language and get used to the new school and wider environment.

The relationship between SEN and PSS

One point to note at this juncture is that the included studies, themselves, appear to conflate SEN and mental health. For example, Migliarini (2020, p. 316) included as ‘disabled’ participants those with “learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders”, and Kaya and Yıldız (2023, p. 331) speak of the two most common ‘disabilities’ among Syrian refugees in Türkiye being “intellectual disabilities and post-traumatic stress disorder”. Indeed, the latter authors argue that war has caused “the development of other psychiatric disorders, especially post-traumatic stress disorder” which can ‘combine’ with “an intellectual disability or autism” to exacerbate difficulties (p. 340). Klopota and Klopota (2024, p. 248) also report how military actions such as shelling, occupation and evacuation can exacerbate existing conditions or developmental disorders, and then complicate adapting to relatively safe living conditions in new contexts – and especially when combined with the “baggage of individual and collective grief of war”.

Key workers in Elliott et al.’s (2019, p. 40) study, too, noted that “when considering SEN, trauma appears to present and related strongly to whatever difficulties the young person is experiencing”. This was multiplied with other challenges such as limited English proficiency and delayed prior schooling, to the extent that participants believed ‘refugee status’ should be a special education need in its own right, “given its impact on learning”, and especially for teenagers (p. 38). Jäger et al. (2021), for their part, include psychosocial support (PSS) as part of the additional resources provided to refugee students to help them cope with the impacts of potentially traumatising experiences. This raises the question of if and where the line should be drawn between the disability and mental health fields, and especially as reactions to severe stress are elsewhere studied under common mental disorders (e.g. de Montgomery et al., 2022).

Subasi Singh et al. (2021, p. 15), however, give a justification for this conflation. They report that in Austria, when refugee students arrive with a forced migration background and “severe trauma”, educational experts recommend SEN status as a protective measure. It permits children to participate in school without feelings of constant failure, gives them the chance to

obtain the compulsory school leaving certificate and is often then revoked when it is considered no longer necessary. Such an approach recognises that “war and forced displacement endanger not only the health but also the social and psychological well-being” of refugees; meaning that they need “not only material but also comprehensive social and psychological support” (Klopota & Klopota, 2024, pp. 247-248).

Practical and organisational challenges

Access

Access challenges can be summarised as relating to availability, administrative barriers and physical access. Firstly, there is limited availability of inclusive educational spaces in the Czech Republic (Klopota & Klopota, 2024) and in Germany (Steigmann, 2020). As Steigmann notes, this leads to large class sizes, teachers becoming overburdened and thus all (refugee) children’s needs being unmet, and not just those with disabilities. Parents also then become less willing to enrol their children and schools end up refusing refugee children with disabilities due to resource constraints (Steigmann, 2020). In addition, there is reported to be little availability of remedial, developmental and extracurricular services such as specialist support and sports clubs (Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Similarly, in Türkiye, refugee children are deprived of some out-of-school services such as rehabilitation which are provided for free for Turkish students (Eker et al., 2023). Furthermore, some professionals such as educational psychologists and welfare officers responsible for SEN may not be visible or accessible to key workers, pupils or families (Elliott et al., 2019).

Administrative barriers also come into play, such as when documents are missing. School certificates and other documents are important in providing an overview of a newly arriving refugee student’s educational career (Istif Inci et al., 2024; Jäger, 2021). However, as is the case for refugees with and without disabilities around the world, many refugees and their families lack such documents, or those available are difficult to equate with the new country’s standards ((Istif Inci et al., 2024; Jäger, 2021; Klopota & Klopota, 2024). Beyond educational and health documents, refugees in Türkiye have to acquire temporary protection status before being able to apply for public services (Istif Inci et al., 2024); and some individuals with developmental disabilities were said to be unable to benefit from special education services as they were not Turkish citizens (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023). Even if refugees’ paperwork is not an issue, in the UK, school managers may be less willing to accept *any* students with a refugee background, due to the neoliberal marketisation of education which emphasises performance in examinations and league tables (Bhatti et al., 2024). In Germany, similarly, special schools may be more eager to enrol refugee children with disabilities than ‘regular’ schools, who often use resource constraints and other issues as excuses not to do so (Steigmann, 2020).

For families, location can be key to how easily they can access schools and resources. They might be dispersed to areas of the new country where they are isolated and have little assistance from potential community support networks (Bhatti et al., 2024). Dispersal also means that children with SEN are subject to the availability of local expertise and resources, and may place extra demands on schools (Bhatti et al., 2024). In some areas of Northern Ireland, for example, both mainstream and special educational schools are said to be “saturated” (Elliott et al., 2019, p. 31).

Even if disabled refugees can find a school or university to accept them and have the correct documents to enrol, the physical space itself may not be accessible. For example, there was the common challenge of arranging transport for children with SEN in Northern Ireland, and especially as many parents had experienced traumas and physical injuries and did not have independent means of transport (Elliott et al., 2019). School buildings in Germany were also said to be inaccessible (Steigmann, 2020), as were universities in Türkiye (İstif İnci et al., 2024), which made independent living difficult for those with mobility issues and/or visual impairment.

With this said, access to education for disabled refugees appears to be improving, in general. But Bacakova (2023, p. 35) makes an important point: that this does not necessarily mean that their educational experiences are always “useful”; or indeed that their right to education has been fulfilled. This points to the issue of quality, beyond the issue of attendance. Disabled refugees’ education is impacted by a lack of acceptable, appropriate learning content, facilities, goods and services which take into account their needs, cultures, perspectives and languages (Giavrimis, 2023; Steigmann, 2020). Young refugees in Türkiye, themselves, wished to attend school but felt that the education system was not adequate for their needs – and that while “the schools in Syria were better”, they did not want to return due to the war (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023).

Finances and other resources

The studies reported how finances were a key issue for *all* disabled learners, and for *all* refugee learners. For example, in Greece, educational facilities for the inclusion of learners with disabilities are said to be insufficient for not only refugees, but also the “native population”, due to the country’s economic situation and inability to provide adequate resources (Giavrimis, 2023, p. 246). Funding issues were also reported in inclusive education in Scotland (Çakiray, 2024), and in education in general in Germany, leading to an ‘overburdened system’ and “structural deficits regarding schools’ intercultural equipment” (Steigmann, 2020, p. 8). In Northern Ireland, due to funding caps, schools must pay for interpreters themselves if they are required more than twice per year – meaning that in some cases they are reluctant to do so (Elliott et al., 2019). Outside of education, while Türkiye offers free healthcare and medicine to all refugees, there is no financial or psychological assistance available for those who are disabled (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023).

Still in Türkiye, at the university level, there are low or no tuition fees, but high living and transport costs are a significant barrier for many students (Istif Inci et al., 2024). Istif Inci et al. note that disabled learners may be accepted into university programmes far from home, which means that they then face the challenge of establishing an independent life. Two studies reported that refugee students with disabilities could be working part-time jobs to support their families, meaning that they missed school (Eker et al., 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024).

For institutions, there is also a lack of resources: with the key constraint being qualified practitioners. In mainstream schools and educational authorities, in particular, there is a lack of educational staff who are qualified in and/or knowledgeable about disability, migration, inclusive education and intercultural skills (Çakiray, 2024; Giavrimis, 2023; Steigmann, 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). In Germany, there is a backlog in the training and awareness-raising of teachers in areas such as inclusive competences (Steigmann, 2020). This includes teachers and support staff such as experts in special needs, physiotherapists, speech therapists, sign language interpreters and indeed teachers with an immigration background themselves, and can influence parents' decisions about where to enrol their child (Steigmann, 2020).

Data and information

Another access issue is the lack of data and background information on displaced populations with disabilities, both at the global and national levels (Bešić et al., 2018a; Çakiray, 2024; Istif Inci et al., 2024). In Austria, research has identified a lack of data on disability, as although there is data on the distribution of students among different school types, there is no data on their age group, country of origin, gender or disability (Bešić et al., 2018b). This means that there is no information on students who fall into the category of both disabled learner and refugee (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Other intersectional information, according to age, gender, nationality, level of education and first language use, is also missing across Europe (Bešić et al., 2018b; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Subasi Singh et al. note that organisations offering support to refugee families are also lacking specific knowledge of the children's (educational) needs. As Bešić et al. (2018b) argue, data on disability is sorely needed to be able to provide appropriate support.

Families, too, lack information (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). This may be about where to find professional help, for example, or about how activities for children with SEN are carried out; about resource centres; or about where to find specialist advice, medical support, interpreters or organisations who can advise families (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). This was also reported among refugee parents in England who were struggling to engage with the education system, as they did not know what services were on offer or how to access them (Bhatti et al., 2024). Bhatti et al. highlight how much of a challenge this might be for unaccompanied minors with SEN who have to depend on themselves.

Coordination and collaboration

Further practical obstacles were raised in the studies, despite there being comprehensive and differentiated legal frameworks for inclusive education in countries such as Germany (Steigmann, 2020). One key challenge was variously described as cooperation, coordination or collaboration. There was said to be a lack of ‘transdisciplinary’ collaboration, for example, between professionals such as teachers, social workers and psychologists (Subasi Singh et al., 2021), with insufficient expert support for teaching staff (Eker et al., 2023). This left teachers in Greece feeling that they could not accept and manage the situation, or that they were not given the power to shape processes (for example, deciding on teaching models and curricula) (Giavrimis, 2023). There was also said to be limited cooperation between parents and teachers (Eker et al., 2023, p. 553), which some teachers felt “slowed down” disabled refugee children’s learning at home. They felt that they had insufficient parental support, and that parents had low expectations of their disabled children – although some families were described as being “more caring, sensitive, and open to cooperation” (p. 554). Parents, for their part, have various challenges when it comes to engaging with their disabled child’s education – as we will see in the sections below.

Language and communication challenges

Language support is one area which, according to Subasi Singh et al. (2021), connects SEN and forced migration, and yet it may fail to be provided. For all newcomers, a lack of language proficiency is a key barrier to inclusion (Giavrimis, 2023). Refugee children in Türkiye, for example, have found it difficult to learn Turkish due to having limited exposure to the language and a lack of pedagogical content supporting their language development (Eker et al., 2023). Parents in Türkiye have echoed that language and communication are challenges, and especially between their children and their Turkish classmates – partly due to a lack of social interaction (albeit an issue which improves over time).

The language barrier makes it hard for families to support their children’s education and argue their position (Eker et al., 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024). It can also cause breakdowns in communication between families and schools, leading to suspicion and mistrust, as parents do not understand professionals’ decisions (Bhatti et al., 2024). In Bhatti et al.’s study, for example, no one had tried to explain processes and different options available to them, and indeed they did not know of a person responsible for explaining such procedures – making them feel disempowered, distressed, ignored and deliberately kept in the dark. Families may also miss crucial appointments with services due to interpreters failing to show up to meetings, which leads to feelings of frustration – especially as it may reflect badly on them (Elliott et al., 2019).

When working with refugees with disabilities, teachers in Türkiye have also reported that language and communication challenges impact the quality of education and training – even if they have an “emotional connection” with disabled learners (Eker et al., 2023, p. 551). Schooling in Germany and Greece is also said to focus on the national language, and to lack multilingual and multicultural support structures (Giavrimis, 2023; Steigmann, 2020); as do organisations catering to children with disabilities (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Bhatti et al. (2024) also found that schools in the UK were not sufficiently aware of differences in refugee children’s home languages and customs, which was particularly difficult when children had SEN. On top of this, they do not always have sufficient access to interpreters or bilingual teachers and support staff, meaning that they cannot communicate effectively with parents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Bhatti et al., 2024). This can lead teachers to believe that parents are not “fully engaged” in their child’s education (p. 131), as we have seen above.

For Ukrainian refugees with disabilities in the Czech Republic, not only is there a language barrier, but teachers may use materials which are not adequate or accessible for refugee learners with visual or hearing impairments (Klopota & Klopota, 2024).

Social challenges

Attitudes towards refugee learners with disabilities

The studies also reported social challenges which impacted disabled refugee learners’ educational inclusion. For Klopota and Klopota (2024), the social challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic, for example, were similar to those faced by all people with special needs: including stereotypes, public perceptions and limited social interaction. This also applies to learners’ relationships with social workers, too: as Steigmann (2020) argues that their perceptions of refugee children with disabilities and impairments/disabilities themselves can influence the support and consultations they provide.

Within educational institutions, refugee students in Türkiye have reported a “dual prejudice and discrimination against them as both refugees and students with disabilities” (İstif İnci et al., 2024, p. 9). This could be due to a lack of awareness on the part of the teaching staff, who then used teaching styles which did not take into account learners’ different communication needs, for example. In a more direct act of discrimination, Migliarini (2020) has noted that Italian educators can perceive refugee youth as illiterate, which exacerbates their racialisation and exclusion. In Austria, too, Bešić et al. (2018a) found that both teachers’ and the general public’s attitudes towards the inclusion of (refugee) students with(out) disabilities are influenced by student’s attributes such as refugee status and disability type, with these attributes independently linked to more negative attitudes. When gender was introduced into their analysis, teachers and the general public were found to have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion

of Austrian girls into mainstream primary schools than refugee girls, and towards the inclusion of girls with a physical disability than those with behavioural disorders. Furthermore, refugee girls without disabilities were perceived as negatively as Austrian girls with behavioural disorders. Therefore, the authors argue that “it is justified to assume that refugee girls with disabilities experience intersectional discrimination” (p. 463).

Such attitudes of ‘native’ peers, parents and wider school actors can significantly influence disabled refugee learners’ inclusion (Giavrimis, 2023). Public attitudes, too, can affect the implementation of inclusive education, as they can influence legislation, policies, practice and disabled refugee students’ adaptation in schools (McBrien, 2005; Scior, 2011; UNICEF, 2013, cited in Bešić et al., 2018b). Such prejudices can also lead some refugee students to be unwilling to disclose their disability at all, for fear of discrimination and stigmatisation based in ableist attitudes (Istif Inci et al., 2024).

Segregation and social isolation

In one study, participants from the general public supported a segregated setting for all newcomers to learn the national language, as it was planned by the new government (Bešić et al., 2018a). However, this prompted the authors to ask how their inclusion could be successful when they were segregated from majority students in the school system. Newly arriving families, such as Ukrainian families in the Czech Republic, were also recommended to enrol their children in special institutions rather than mainstream schools (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). This was perceived as limiting their ability to develop social skills, as while these institutions facilitate some form of educational inclusion, they are still a closed environment. Similarly, in Germany, the share of pupils with SEN being educated at ‘regular’ schools was said to amount to 37.7% (Steigmann, 2020). In special schools, German language support and intercultural approaches are lacking; meaning that if refugee children with disabilities are not segregated on the basis of their disability, they may be segregated on the basis of their language skills.

In refugee camps in Türkiye, children could not attend schools outside of the camps, and the camp schools lacked special education support (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023). Aside from missing out on this support, they also had limited access to health facilities and “continued to live in social isolation”, which made integration an “impossibility” (p. 341). As Kaya and Yıldız put it, “the burden of this social exclusion could be described as being twice a minority due to the stigma of disability and being a refugee” (p. 340).

If refugee children with disabilities are not segregated on the basis of their impairment, they may be segregated on the basis of their language skills.

(Steigmann, 2020)

Family-level factors

Families' views on disability and SEN

Families may not recognise or understand SEN categories, or may perceive mental health differently to educational and other service providers in the new country (Bhatti et al., 2024) – with the result being that they may respond to their children's disabilities quite differently (Jäger et al., 2021). Some may believe, for example, that mental health affects cognitive ability. For these reasons, young refugees with disabilities may remain "invisible to the authorities, hidden away at home by families on account of stigma, never entering the radar of those who can teach and liaise with these groups" (Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 137). This can isolate both parents and their children.

Perceptions can differ among families depending on whether the child was disabled from birth, or became disabled later on; with some families associating disability with indigenous belief systems and religion, whereby disability is caused by 'bad intentions', envy or the 'evil eye' (Bhatti et al., 2024). Parents may also be offended by the news that their child has SEN, due to a lack of knowledge about SEN and its consequences for their child's education – which can be made worse by language barriers (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Some could see the SEN label as a punishment from the new school, as their child never had such a 'disease' in the home country; leading to feelings of humiliation, anger and doubt in the quality of the teachers in the area (Bhatti et al., 2024). Others may believe they have to find a cure, and seek out help from a religious leader from their community, either in the new country or at home; or they worry that social services might take their child away (Bhatti et al., 2024).

However, as Steigmann (2020) stresses, parents of refugee children with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, and understandings can vary widely – as well as their expectations of their child and the education system (Bhatti et al., 2024). For example, some parents may not consider learning disabilities to be disabilities at all, and may reject certain terminology as it is associated with shame. Others may not have academic expectations of their children with disabilities (Eker et al., 2023), meaning that they are (pleasantly) surprised that their child is able to attend school (Elliott et al., 2019). This is both a positive outcome and a source of stress, as it is an unfamiliar experience. Going through rigorous assessments, finding placements and being separated from their child for the first time become significant steps, with a lot of assistance required from key workers and other support staff – and the potential for families to accept sub-par standards due to unfamiliarity with the system (Elliott et al., 2019). This is also a result of being unaware of where to ask for help, or how to insist on extra help (Elliott et al., 2019). Refugee families might also be unaware of appeal procedures (Bhatti et al., 2024).

While some educational leaders and researchers suggest the importance of learning as much as possible about refugee children's cultural worlds in order to understand these issues and better support families, in one study, the parents countered this with a question: "how much knowledge do schools have about the family lives of their white English students? What right do schools have to know more about migrant children's families?" (Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 136). As the authors note, this may stem from a desire to protect their children with SEN from 'unnecessary' intrusions.

How much knowledge do schools have about the family lives of their white English students? What right do schools have to know more about migrant children's families?

(Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 136)

The role of parents' 'capacity'

Parents' 'capacity' – in terms of their knowledge, language skills, confidence and power to act – was also mentioned as an important component of disabled refugees' educational inclusion (Steigmann, 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Steigmann emphasises that parents are not a homogeneous group, and that personal conditions and background can influence support required and obtained. In addition, they may have varying amounts of knowledge about how the education system works and daily activities at school, or indeed they may be unaware that their child with disabilities can attend school at all. They may also be unaware of their legal entitlements and that they have a right to decide their child's school; or they may know, but require support from social workers to enact it. Language barriers and limited confidence can then prevent them from organising services such as school transport, and indeed how they engage with schools. Having potentially experienced traumatic events, they too require support for their well-being, both for themselves and to be able to advocate for their children.

Parents may 'accept' special schooling, but not the specific schools selected for their children – and then struggle with the process of choosing a new institution and the availability of places locally (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Contrary to the misunderstanding that migrant parents are uninterested in their child's education, Subasi Singh et al. highlight how parents suffer from a lack of communication from schools, a vague diagnostic process, a lack of opportunities to engage and general uncertainty. All of these factors cause them to feel powerless, as they have little say when it comes to inclusion and wider educational processes.

Lack of recognition, representation and clarity on responsibility

It was also found that there was a lack of activity of local public organisations in terms of defending the interests of families raising children with SEN (Klopota & Klopota, 2024), and that schools were supporting these children 'off their own backs': making adjustments to assist children to acclimatise however they could, in their own way, without official standards or frameworks (Elliott et al., 2019). This stems from a wider issue of disabled refugee children and their families not being recognised or represented, and consequently resources and support being misdistributed – as was reported to be the case in Scotland (Çakiray, 2024). As Bhatti et al. (2024, p. 133) put it, in the case of England, "incomers are expected to seamlessly 'blend into' and adapt to the host society, which remains essentially unchanged by any new influx. As a result, difficulties emerge not just as a consequence of linguistic challenges but through cultural dissonance". This can cause frustration among parents who may feel that processes were faster and/or clearer in the home country, or that their child was well taken care of – but they cannot or do not want to return (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024).

This issue of responsibility-taking also emerges at the school level. For example, some health professionals may feel it is the school's responsibility to educate all young people, while teachers may feel it is health professionals' responsibility to issue a label which will garner them more funding to help the learner (Bhatti et al., 2024). At the same time, Bhatti et al. report, parents can feel excluded and have their own decisions overridden, not taken into account or not even sought – with schools and authorities instead shifting responsibility between themselves.

Supports for disabled refugee learners' inclusion

This is not to say that the studies only reported negatives. Syrian parents in Eker et al.'s (2023, p. 553) study, for example, were "mostly satisfied" with their children's school environment in Türkiye; with the coordination of their learning; with communication and cooperation; and with the services and educational materials provided. Teachers in Greece also appreciated certain aspects of inclusive education, such as the possibility of "starting a new beginning in life, student engagement, skills development and socialisation" (Giavrimis, 2023, p. 246). For Giavrimis, this highlighted the "necessity" of education, and how school inclusion can tackle educational and social exclusion – for example, by enabling children to take on active roles within their school and wider society.

On a practical level, the studies spoke of financial supports which can promote disabled refugees' access to education. For example, in Türkiye, Disabled Student Allowances expand access to education for youth with disabilities, but refugees' mobility difficulties and limited access to information meant that they did not qualify before the age limit of 21 (İstif İnci et al., 2024). Similarly, Turkish university scholarships can offer a "relatively dignified pathway for

accommodating students” with disabilities (p. 11), if they are able to pass a basic learning skills test (offered in multiple languages, depending on the university’s availability) and a Turkish language proficiency test. However, few of the 42 universities who offer these exams have accessible information about them on their webpages (for example, subtitled videos or sign language interpretation). For their part, administrators stated that this was due to a lack of applications from students with disabilities.

Many studies spoke of support on a social level, however. For instance, they described how across teachers, there was support for the inclusion of refugee children with disabilities in schools, based mostly in the fact that it is a right (Giavrimis, 2023). Interviewed teachers also believed that education promotes social inclusion in a new environment and offers an opportunity for a new beginning; that skills development enables disabled refugee students to take action in school and later in society; and that inclusion in schools is a gateway to acceptance in society (Giavrimis, 2023). Both teachers and parents appreciated the support of interpreters (Eker et al., 2023), and noted the impact of other specific individuals who used their initiative: such as a teacher who did evening classes in Arabic, specific Education Authority officers who were commended for their communication skills and approach with refugee families, and health professionals who combined appointments so that only one appointment and interpreter were required (Elliott et al., 2019). In addition, Elliott et al. note the importance of community support for refugee families, which in Northern Ireland took the form of English language classes and homework support groups.

Good practice schools had very accommodating, positive attitudes and were creative in their strategies.

(Elliott et al., 2019, p. 54)

At the administrative level, positive practice examples included schools which had “accommodating, positive attitudes and were creative in their strategies”, and those which permitted children to access specialist educational placements while still waiting for an assessment (Elliott et al., 2019, p. 54). Other supports included willingness among all relevant agencies to engage with and assist refugee families; good coordination between them; SEN being identified early; and information being communicated effectively. A side effect of this was that young people were emotionally supported.

Importantly, one study explicitly pointed to young refugees’ own “hard work, courage, moral strength, and solidarity” – as well as their “enormous resilience” – as supports (Istif Inci et al., 2024, p. 12). Indeed, the authors encourage researchers and practitioners to focus more on their great potential, rather than only on their vulnerabilities. This relates to Steigmann’s (2020) point that parents’ capacity – in terms of knowledge about the education system, their own support system and their personal conditions – is one of the decisive elements for the ‘success’ of inclusive schooling.

Such resilience and 'capacity' are fostered by support workers who 'empower' refugee families by helping them to build their skills and knowledge, increase their independence and promote their integration into their new societies – performing a 'bridging' role between families and health, social, legal, political and education services (Elliott et al., 2019). Social workers aim to promote parents' independence, by providing them with the knowledge and information they need to do appointments and applications on their own and to make their own informed decisions regarding their child's future – what Steigmann (2020) summarises as strengthening their 'capacity'. This also includes knowing that they have the right to decide in which type of school they can enrol their child – whether 'regular' or a 'special school' – and how schooling functions in terms of daily routines and educational possibilities. Social workers' practice is aided by having knowledge of the child's background, so that they can quickly adapt their consultations and assistance provided; and by establishing trust in their relationships with parents (Steigmann, 2020). They use a range of measures to do so, such as accompanying parents to appointments, acting as mediators and providing information on rights and appeals procedures; although, overall, while focusing on the parents' needs and empowerment, their work is ultimately limited by the fact that the school system is generally "overburdened" (p. 12).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Suggestions for new and improved approaches

The studies suggested various improvements for educational systems and approaches for refugee learners with disabilities. They emphasised early assessment and support, ensuring needs are detected early to create the best conditions for educational success (Jäger et al., 2021; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Elliott et al., 2019). This involves providing better professional support, flexibility and assessment tools for staff, and facilitating exchange across actors involved in their education and wider resettlement. Streamlined processes for verifying foreign medical and social documents and ensuring quick assessments are also recommended to avoid delays and ensure prompt support (Elliott et al., 2019).

Avoiding misdiagnosis is crucial, with professionals encouraged to look beyond language and cultural differences (Bhatti et al., 2024; Elliott et al., 2019). This includes being cautious in determining that children have special educational needs (SEN) due to language difficulties, as they might simply not have acquired the local language yet. Professionals should also be aware of different approaches to disability and be provided with tools and knowledge for recognising the specific needs of disabled refugee children, such as trauma-sensitive language acquisition (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Educational psychologists should be more involved, providing guidance to key workers and helping schools to understand the difficulties faced by disabled refugee children. They could also help to explain the SEN assessment process to learners and their families in a more accessible manner, improving communication between educational authorities and those involved in SEN assessment and provision (Elliott et al., 2019).

Parental support is also vital. Schools should adapt to parents' preferred terminology initially and provide translation and multilingual counseling services as needed (Steigmann, 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Employing first-language teachers in schools, where possible, can facilitate communication with parents and children, as immigrant teachers understand what it means to be away from one's home country and may have a better understanding of culturally specific approaches to disability (Steigmann, 2020). Support groups and opportunities for education professionals and parents to discuss SEN issues in safe spaces without judgement could be created, with the child at the centre of discussions (Bhatti et al., 2024). Informational, psychological, rehabilitative, and socio-legal resource banks for families and teachers could be established, involving academic researchers, specialists from social institutions, parents, and public organisation representatives (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). These resource banks could help overcome communication, information and socialisation barriers, and go some way towards reconciling different cultural views and expectations related to SEN among practitioners and families (Bhatti et al., 2024).

Improved and updated teacher training is also necessary, covering interculturality, disability and linguistic diversity (Giavrimis, 2023; Çakiray, 2024; Koukou et al., 2024). This training should be robust, structured, and up-to-date, making inclusion and SEN issues a fixed component of training programmes (Bhatti et al., 2024; Steigmann, 2020). It should also cover the social model of disability, intersectional, anti-racist discourse (Migliarini, 2017), and how trauma, frustration due to limited local language skills, victimisation, and poverty can manifest (Elliott et al., 2019). Teachers should be provided with opportunities, time and resources for learning from the different communities they work with and with skills related to the different needs of refugee students with disabilities (Koukou et al., 2024). Such improved awareness and understanding among all professionals would help to improve the well-being of disabled refugee children (Elliott et al., 2019).

Collaboration between all actors involved in inclusive education is also essential to build stronger networks and communication practices (Çakiray, 2024; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Interaction should be fostered between specialists in the SEN field, such as speech therapists, psychologists, sensory integration specialists, and behaviour specialists, as well as between refugee and local families of children with SEN, schools, other educational institutions, refugee agencies, and specialised centres or organisations providing information and support (Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Migliarini, 2017). Better links should be established between the fields of special education and intercultural education, as they work towards the same goal of inclusion (Koukou et al., 2024). Increased collaboration and cooperation would help to build stronger networks and communication practices, increase transparency between professionals, aid assessments and streamline processes (Bhatti et al., 2024; Migliarini, 2017). It could also provide an adequate network of medical and psychological support for the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among asylum-seeking and refugee young people (Migliarini, 2017). While support workers or social workers can establish such initial bridges between families, agencies, and schools, all parties must work to maintain these links. However, processes could be coordinated by a key contact with responsibility for this role (Elliott et al., 2019).

Developing appropriate facilities and providing reasonable accommodations are key to ensuring equal opportunities for disabled refugee learners (Giavrimis, 2023). This includes providing visual aids, adapting lunch menus, considering school assembly content and being flexible during settling-in for children who are separated from their parents for the first time (Elliott et al., 2019). In mainstream classrooms, support and services should be increased, including adapting educational materials in line with each child's individual characteristics, and especially when they are learning a new language (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). Providing more intercultural, multilingual special education materials that take into account the needs of learners with disabilities and the overall diversity of the student population is also recommended (Eker et al., 2023; Giavrimis, 2023).

To more broadly support the inclusion of refugee learners with disabilities, reducing waiting times for school placements was suggested (Elliott et al., 2019). This could also optimise their socialisation process (Klopota & Klopota, 2024). In addition, Klopota and Klopota note,

specialists and institutions could provide meaningful leisure time and extracurricular activities and sports facilities, where children can develop skills.

All of these actions need to be underpinned by increased budgets to support inclusive education for refugee students and clear standards and mechanisms on disability and age-appropriate assistance (Çakiray, 2024; Steigmann, 2020). When increasing investments in resources, this should be done purposefully, such as by investing in better-qualified staff and support services (Steigmann, 2020). To tackle learners' and families' personal financial challenges, universities could create EU or international-level scholarships to provide a dignified pathway into higher education (Istif Inci et al., 2024). Beyond targeted funding in education, governments should, in general, provide better financial support for disabled refugees (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023).

At the national level, establishing a policy specifically on refugee children with disabilities based on social justice and solidarity is recommended (Giavrimis, 2023). This policy should make resources easily accessible, deconstruct dominant ableist and cultural norms and eliminate exclusion. It should reignite the debate on educational policy, highlighting power relations and conflicts of interest and the need to incorporate an intercultural approach. Indeed, some authors argued that the entire framework of inclusive education needs an overhaul (Migliarini, 2017), to instead take a focus on rights and skills rather than needs (Istif Inci et al., 2024). This approach would foster environments of acceptance and respect within multicultural classes and take into account diversity within communities (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Understanding the realities and experiences of refugee families should be improved among all actors aiding them (Elliott et al., 2019). Refugee learners and their families should be provided with in-depth knowledge of the educational system and other available support services to ensure that they are prepared and informed, and should be allowed to share their educational and social expectations (Giavrimis, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Migliarini, 2017).

These comprehensive actions aim to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for refugee learners with disabilities.

Suggested future research directions

National studies are needed which map the challenges faced by groups 'hidden' behind general categorisations, such as refugees with disabilities in education (Giavrimis, 2023); as well as teachers' and educational authorities' approaches towards these learners, and their awareness of their realities (Steigmann, 2020). It was also suggested, on the one hand, to conduct quantitative studies with larger sample sizes (Eker et al., 2023); while also centring the views and experiences of refugees (particularly refugee children) themselves on how to solve existing problems (Bešić et al., 2018a; Elliott et al., 2019; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023). Istif Inci et al. (2024, p. 13) recommend doing so via "an inclusive interdisciplinary participatory action approach", as "no

consistent and rights-based policymaking is possible without reliable and comprehensive data and detailed intersectional profiling of refugees and persons with disabilities". Migliarini (2017) suggests longitudinal studies which track asylum-seeking and refugee students over time and through their educational programmes, job training and migration status determination processes to better understand the work which needs to be done on inclusive education pathways and how their dreams and expectations change. Such studies could explore, for example, the extent to which disability or refugee status is considered the dominant characteristic of their identity, in order to better identify gaps in educational support (Samsari et al., 2024).

Specific areas of intervention to be studied include how education systems can respond to their language education needs (Bešić et al., 2018a); on each field of assistance, such as special education, healthcare and employment (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023); how to promote in-school collaboration among teachers (Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Looking at public opinion and how it can affect educational inclusion, it was also suggested to qualitatively explore how attitudes towards refugees with disabilities vary according to country of origin and language skills, for example; the attitudes of directly involved peers, teachers, directors and parents in the school setting; and how multiple discriminations interact with each other, to reveal needs relating to resources, training and knowledge (Bešić et al., 2018a). Klopota and Klopota (2024) stress the importance of monitoring the dynamics of inclusive processes in all aspects of life, to help formulate an effective strategy for the inclusion of refugee families with children with SEN.

Box 1: Ideas for future research questions

1. Needs assessment and case management

- How and when do needs assessment and case management procedures take place for refugee learners with disabilities, if at all?
- What are the best practices for ensuring timely and accurate needs assessments for newly arrived refugee learners with disabilities?

2. Identity and educational support

- How do refugee learners with disabilities perceive their dual identity, and how does this perception impact their educational experiences and outcomes?
- How do refugee learners with disabilities reflect on gaps in educational support?

3. Language learning needs

- How can education systems respond effectively to the language learning needs of refugee learners with disabilities?

- What are the most effective strategies for supporting bilingual or multilingual education for refugee learners with disabilities?

4. Collaboration and coordination

- How can collaboration between teachers, specialists and support staff be promoted to better support refugee learners with disabilities?
- What models of inter-agency collaboration are most effective in supporting the educational inclusion of refugee learners with disabilities?

5. Cultural and linguistic barriers

- How do cultural and linguistic barriers impact the assessment and diagnosis of disabilities among refugee learners?
- What are the best practices for overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers in the educational assessment of refugee learners with disabilities?

6. Social and attitudinal challenges

- How do social attitudes towards disability and refugee status intersect to impact the educational experiences of refugee learners with disabilities?
- What interventions can effectively address social isolation and segregation experienced by refugee learners with disabilities?

7. Family engagement and support

- How can schools and educational authorities better support the engagement of refugee families in the education of their children with disabilities?
- What are the most effective ways to empower refugee families to advocate for their children's educational needs?

8. Policy and practice

- What policies are most effective in addressing the specific needs of refugee learners with disabilities?
- How can inclusive education policies be reframed to consider multiple forms of marginalisation, including disability and refugee status?
- Related to this, at the school level, what can institutions do to ensure that they are inclusive of and can best support refugee learners with disabilities?

9. Longitudinal studies

- What are the long-term educational trajectories of refugee learners with disabilities, and what factors contribute to their success or challenges? national
- How do the educational expectations and aspirations of refugee learners with disabilities evolve over time?

10. Intersectional approaches

- How can intersectional approaches be integrated into educational research and practice to better support refugee learners with disabilities?
- What are the compounded impacts of racialisation, language background and psychosocial needs on the educational experiences of refugee learners with disabilities?

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