

Promoting the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe

Context

The inclusion of refugees with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)¹ in educational contexts in Europe presents a complex challenge requiring a comprehensive and intersectional approach. This brief outlines recommendations for policy and practice to reduce exclusionary practices and to ensure that learners from refugee backgrounds with disabilities receive the support they need to thrive in education.

About the research

The key findings and recommendations here stem from a scoping review conducted by the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE). A search of the 1,007 resources currently held in the HERE Knowledge Base found that **just 17 studies** discuss the needs, outcomes, and/or experiences of this multiply marginalised population.

The findings highlight that refugees with disabilities are a diverse group with varying degrees of disability, language skills, migration experiences, legal statuses and family situations. However, common issues include a lack of language and intercultural support, cultural differences and financial constraints. Gender also plays a role in shaping experiences.

Policy recommendations

Reframe inclusive education: Avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and tailor support to learners' specific individual needs.

Reform educational policies to include the unique needs of all learners, and ensure that approaches acknowledge and support individuals' complex identities – including the multiple, intersecting factors which can result in marginalisation and exclusion.

Improve SEN and disability-related needs assessment procedures for refugee learners: Enhance assessment procedures for newly arriving learners to account for non-majority language backgrounds and the impacts of flight on socio-emotional well-being. Focus on areas of proficiency rather than deficits.

Invest in ongoing training: Implement robust and structured training programmes for teachers and other actors working with refugee learners covering transculturality, disability and linguistic diversity. Equip teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to support refugee learners with disabilities effectively.

¹ See Footnote 1 of the full report for a clarification on how we understand and use terminology on disability.

Key findings

Refugee learners face issues with diagnosis of disabilities and assessment of needs, including unclear procedures, a lack of coordination and cultural and linguistic barriers. This can lead to misdiagnosis or delayed support.

In terms of access, there is limited availability of inclusive educational spaces and support services, and refugee learners may lack required documents. Once enrolled, they may then face physical access issues in school buildings and universities. There are funding issues for inclusive education and a lack of resources on the part of educational institutions, social and health services (and families themselves), which results in a lack of qualified practitioners.

Further challenges are posed by a lack of transdisciplinary collaboration between professionals and limited cooperation between parents and teachers. This is made worse by schools lacking multilingual and multicultural support structures.

In terms of social barriers, refugee learners with disabilities often face social isolation, segregation and negative attitudes from peers, teachers and the public, based on their refugee status and/or disability. For families, language barriers, a lack of information on assessment procedures and forms of support available and cultural differences in understandings of disability can hinder their engagement with the education system and support services.

Finally, segregated settings for newcomers with disabilities limit social skills development, reduce contact with peers and opportunities to learn about cultural practices in their new context and can serve to exclude rather than include individuals.

Invest in accessible facilities, individualised support/resources and adaptable content.

Provide comprehensive support for families, including translation and counselling services, information on available resources and opportunities for engagement with the education system.

Foster collaboration and coordination: Promote interaction among educational, health and social services to provide holistic support for refugee learners with disabilities.

Establish inclusive educational practices which recognise the diversity of the student population. Design intercultural curricula, consider providing multilingual education and create supportive and accepting school environments.

Addressing the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe requires a multifaceted and intersectional approach. By working together to implement the recommendations outlined in this policy brief, policymakers and educators can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment which ensures that this group of learners receive the necessary support to thrive in their educational journeys and beyond.

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