Family Reunification and the Educational Integration of Refugee Children in Austria: A Policy and Practice Perspective

Martin Kölbel[1]

[1] University College of Teacher Education Vienna, Vienna

Correspondence: Dr. Martin Kölbel, University College of Teacher Education Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

Received: October 12, 2025 Accepted: November 6, 2025 Published: November 25, 2025

doi:10.65343/erd.v1i2.52 URL: https://doi.org/10.65343/erd.v1i2.52

Abstract

This study explores the educational integration of refugee children in Austria from the perspectives of parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, primary school teachers, educational authorities, social workers, and after-school educators. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews and applying qualitative content analysis, four central categories emerged: expectations, experiences and challenges, suggestions and wishes, and best practice examples. The findings reveal that integration is shaped by complex and intersecting challenges—linguistic, systemic, and psychosocial in nature—which affect not only students but also their families and educators. Parents struggle with unfamiliar administrative structures, limited language proficiency, and a lack of culturally responsive communication from schools. Teachers and authorities recognize these barriers but report structural constraints and insufficient support. Effective integration measures identified include multilingual orientation programs, intercultural mediation, school-based initiatives such as parent cafés and counseling services, and stronger cooperation with external organizations. These results underscore the need for a multidimensional integration framework aligned with both contextual integration theory and trauma-informed pedagogy. The study supports existing policy recommendations emphasizing inclusive didactics, targeted teacher training, structural reform, and active parental inclusion. It concludes that sustainable educational integration depends on cross-sectoral collaboration and the recognition of refugee families as active partners in the school community.

Keywords: refugee children, educational integration, Austria, family reunification, qualitative research, migration, school policy, trauma-informed education, intercultural communication, inclusive pedagogy

1. Introduction

Family reunification is a cornerstone of international refugee and migration policy, rooted in the recognition that the preservation of family unity is both a fundamental human right and a precondition for successful integration (UNHCR, 2018; Guild & Grant, 2010). For refugees and migrants, the ability to live with close family members—particularly children, spouses, and sometimes extended kin—can significantly affect their psychological well-being, stability, and participation in the host society. In the European Union, family reunification is protected under the Family Reunification Directive (2003/86/EC), yet its implementation remains fragmented and often restrictive, particularly in the context of rising migration flows and growing public concerns about integration capacities (Bonjour, 2017; EMN, 2020).

Austria, like many EU member states, has undergone substantial policy changes regarding migration and asylum in recent years. Following the 2015–2016 refugee influx, Austria introduced stricter criteria for family reunification, including waiting periods, income thresholds, and integration agreements (AIDA, 2023). These measures disproportionately affect recognized refugees, subsidiary protection holders, and unaccompanied minors, who often endure long-term separation from parents or siblings. Despite legal entitlements, practical barriers such as lengthy procedures, documentation requirements, and legal ambiguities create systemic delays, leaving many families in prolonged states of uncertainty (Bhabha et al., 2014). The situation even worsened at the Council of Ministers meeting on March 12, 2025, where an immediate halt to family reunification to Austria was decided in order "to protect the system from becoming overburdened" (Austrian Ministry of the Interior, 2025)

This situation has tangible consequences for the educational system, particularly in schools that serve refugee and migrant children. Reunification or the lack thereof can dramatically shape children's emotional states, learning readiness, and social adjustment. Research has shown that students who are separated from their families experience elevated stress levels, symptoms of trauma, and behavioral challenges, all of which can hinder academic performance and classroom participation (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Pastoor, 2015). In contrast, timely family reunification can contribute to a sense of safety and continuity, thereby promoting more positive educational outcomes and smoother integration into school communities (Rousseau et al., 2001).

In the Austrian school system, educators are increasingly confronted with the dual challenge of supporting newly arrived students while navigating the psychosocial effects of delayed or uncertain family reunification processes. Teachers, school psychologists, and support staff often operate without adequate institutional frameworks or training to address the emotional distress and relational needs that arise from prolonged separation (Gruber & Nowak, 2021). As a result, schools become not only places of education but also critical spaces of care, integration, and sometimes frustration, as they are forced to compensate for gaps in migration and family policy.

This paper examines the intersection of family reunification policies and school experiences of refugee and migrant children in Austria. Drawing on recent research, policy analysis, and empirical insights from educational professionals, the study aims to explore how family unity—or the lack thereof—affects school integration processes. Special attention is given to how educators perceive and respond to students affected by family separation, and how school structures can either mitigate or exacerbate these challenges. In doing so, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how migration policy, legal frameworks, and educational practice intersect in the everyday lives of young refugees in Europe. What is more, the expactations on the Austrian school system of those mostly affected by flight and migration take the center stage – the parents; consequently, this mansucript addresses the following research question: What challenges do parents, schools, and educational authorities face in the integration of students with a refugee or migration background and
what measures and support do parents with a refugee or migration background need in order to overcome these challenges?

2. Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of family reunification must be understood within a broader interdisciplinary framework that includes migration theory**,** integration theory**,** and educational theory. These perspectives help to conceptualize the multifaceted ways in which legal, social, and emotional dimensions of family life intersect with the integration processes of children in educational settings.

2.1 Migration and Transnationalism

Migration is increasingly conceptualized not as a one-time event but as a transnational and dynamic process (Vertovec, 2009). Migrant families are often "stretched" across borders, forming what Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) call 'transnational families', whose members maintain emotional, economic, and social ties despite geographical separation. In such contexts, family reunification is not merely an administrative or legal process but a reconfiguration of transnational family life into a co-present, localized form.

In Austria, family reunification regulations shape these transnational realities by either enabling or obstructing physical cohabitation. The implications are particularly profound for children, whose social integration and psychological stability are often contingent on the presence of close family members (Kohli, 2007).

2.2 Integration Theory: Multidimensional and Contextual

A central lens through which to view family reunification is integration theory, especially the model developed by Ager and Strang (2008), which identifies core domains of refugee integration. These include structural aspects (i.e. education, housing, employment), social connections (i.e. family and community networks), and facilitators such as language and cultural knowledge. Family unity is seen as a crucial enabling factor, directly influencing emotional well-being, social cohesion, and access to education.

In Austria's education system, the school functions as a primary arena of structural and social integration. Children who experience ongoing family separation may face greater difficulties in developing trust, building peer relationships, and participating actively in the learning process (Pastoor, 2015). The absence of family can thus indirectly hinder access to other domains of integration, such as language acquisition and academic progress.

2.3 Trauma and Attachment Theory in the School Context

From a psychological and educational standpoint, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1979) provides valuable insights into the developmental consequences of family separation. Secure attachment relationships—typically formed with primary caregivers—are essential for a child's emotional regulation, exploration, and learning capacity. When reunification is delayed or denied, children may suffer from chronic stress, loss, and identity disruption, which can manifest in school as behavioral difficulties, withdrawal, or learning problems (Rousseau et al., 2001).

Additionally, trauma theory (Pynoos, Steinberg & Goenjian, 1996) highlights that family separation, especially in the context of forced migration, constitutes a traumatic rupture that may be compounded by previous experiences of war, flight, and resettlement. For refugee children in Austrian classrooms, the educational environment often becomes a proxy space for processing such trauma—yet many teachers feel underprepared to offer psychosocial support, especially in the absence of consistent family involvement (Gruber & Nowak, 2021).

2.4 Pedagogical Responsibility and Inclusive Education

From a pedagogical perspective, the theory of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) emphasizes the role of schools in responding to diverse learners' needs by removing barriers to participation and achievement. Family reunification, or lack thereof, constitutes such a barrier—albeit one external to the school itself. Teachers in Austrian schools increasingly find themselves mediating between structural deficiencies in migration policy and the emotional needs of their students.

This raises normative and practical questions about the responsibility of educational institutions in addressing the effects of restrictive reunification policies. Should schools merely "cope" with the consequences, or actively advocate for more child-centered migration frameworks? Integrating insights from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), schools can also be seen as 'agents of social justice', capable of challenging systemic exclusion by creating relational and emotionally safe spaces for all children.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Study Design

For this research project, a qualitative-inductive research approach was employed. Guided interviews were conducted with parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, primary school teachers, and a representative from the regional education authority. The approach is inductive in nature, as it allows for general conclusions to be derived from the analysis and interpretation of individual cases based on the collected data (Herzog, 2013).

A systematizing form of guided interview was selected for data collection. This method is characterized by the targeted elicitation of topic-specific knowledge from participants that is relevant to the defined research focus. The questions were formulated with precision and clarity to ensure consistency and relevance (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2014, p. 24). Guided interviews are particularly suited for capturing the individual perspectives of participants in relation to the overarching research questions (Heinze, 2013, pp. 230–231). In the academic literature, this format is also referred to as a semi-structured interview (Schmidt, 2018, p. 51).

The diverse perspectives of the interviewees were systematically explored using a predefined catalogue of questions. This format aligns with the principles of qualitative social research, as it involves a structured conversation between at least two individuals (Heinze, 2013, pp. 230–231). The roles within the interview setting are clearly delineated: the interviewer guides the dialogue and seeks to access the knowledge of the interviewee, who retains the right to decline answering any question. This safeguards the voluntary and pressure-free nature of participation and encourages honest responses (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 112).

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, with varying levels of structural depth (Schmidt, 2018, pp. 51–52). This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of core thematic areas while allowing space for spontaneous responses that could yield additional insights and experiential depth (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 112).

Interview guides can be either standardized or semi-standardized. In standardized formats, questions are presented in a fixed order with predefined follow-up prompts, ensuring high consistency across all interviews. In semi-standardized interviews, although the core questions remain structured, the sequence can be adapted depending on the interview context. This flexibility allows the interviewer to adjust the conversation to the responses and individual experiences of each participant.

The present study utilized a semi-standardized interview guide, developed in four steps. Initially, a pool of relevant questions was compiled and a draft version of the guide was created. A pilot interview was then conducted to evaluate and, if necessary, revise the guide. Based on the insights gained, the guide was subsequently refined and implemented in the main study (Heinze, 2013).

The study's design primarily involves content analysis (Mayring, 2017; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022), encompassing parents of children at compulsory school age (all of whom having flight background), primary school teachers and one representative of the federal education ministry (i.e. Bildungsdirektion). Patterns identified between individual codes revealed major themes, which can be derived from existing literature (i.e. deductive coding), or through in-vivo (i.e. inductive) coding, using terms for concepts that emerge from the data itself, a method also applied in educational ethnographies […] (Saldana, 2016, p. 106).

3.2 Participants

For the implementation of the interviews, participants were purposefully selected from the three relevant groups: parents, teachers, and representatives of the educational authority. In selecting parents with refugee or migration backgrounds, care was taken to include a diversity of countries of origin and schools attended by their children. Additionally, only parents whose experiences of flight or migration occurred within the past ten years were considered. Parents from Romania, Ukraine, Syria, and Serbia were interviewed. In all cases, detailed information about the research project was provided in advance, including an explanation of the interview process and assurance that only anonymized content from the interviews would be used in the publication.

The length of stay in Austria varied among the participating parents, ranging from two to nine years. Their children attend different schools and are enrolled in both Primary Level I and Primary Level II, ensuring that all grade levels of primary education are represented. In two families, two children attend the respective school, which is why two different age ranges and grade levels apply.

The following table provides an overview of general information about the interviewed parents.

Table 1: General information on the interviewed parents with refugee and migration backgrounds (own illustration)

	P1	P2	P3	P4
Country of Origin	Romania	Ukraine	Serbia	Syria
Length of Stay in Austria	9 years	6 years	3 years	2 years
Age of Child(ren)	10 years	7 and 8 years	7 years	6 and 9 years
Grade Level of Child(ren)	4th grade	1st and 3rd grade	2nd grade	Preschool and 3rd grade

The interviewed teachers vary in age and years of professional experience. All of them have worked with children with refugee and migration backgrounds in their classrooms and shared these experiences during the interviews. The names of the pupils and specific schools were not mentioned. If names were brought up during the interviews, they were anonymized in the transcripts using "(...)". The current school locations are also not disclosed. The teachers come from different schools and each teaches their own class.

The following table presents their age and years of service.

Table 2: General information on the interviewed teachers (own illustration)

	T1	T2	T3	T4
Age	45 years	50 years	32 years	33 years
Years of Service	24 years	28 years	11 years	10 years

The representative of the educational authority has been working in the education department for several years and has held various roles that have evolved over time. He collaborates closely with schools, visits them regularly, gives lectures, and is also involved in the field of migration. In addition, he previously worked as a secondary school teacher several years ago. For reasons of anonymity, neither the specific workplace nor the detailed job description of the interviewee is disclosed.

In addition to the above mentioned teachers and parents, school social workers and after-school educators (i.e. Freizeitpädagogen) have been interviewed, leading to a total of fifteen (N=15) interviews (Note 1) that have been conducted for the purpose of this study.

3.3 Methods

As interviews stand as a prominent and versatile scientific method for gathering qualitative data across various disciplines, this method served as the primary method for this study. Undoubtedly, the main advantage of interviews lies in their ability to provide profound and nuanced insights into participants' experiences, opinions, and emotions (Patton, 2003).

As part of this research project, three different interview guides were developed, each specifically tailored to three distinct perspectives within the school context (see appendix). Interviews were conducted with parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, primary school teachers, and a representative of the educational authority. This differentiation aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the collaboration between these three stakeholders.

The interview guides are structured into four categories: general information about the interviewee, expectations, experiences and challenges, and suggestions and wishes. However, the specific questions within each category vary and were adapted to suit the respective target group.

For parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, the focus was placed on their expectations of the Austrian education system, as well as their personal experiences and challenges with teachers, schools, and authorities. Questions also addressed aspects of their own biographies and their knowledge of the school system.

For primary school teachers and social workers, the study explored the challenges and difficulties they perceive in working with parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, along with their previous experiences in this regard. Additionally, they were invited to express their needs regarding support from the educational authority and to share strategies for fostering successful collaboration and integration of both students and parents.

For the representative of the educational authority, the focus was placed on structural and organizational aspects, particularly concerning communication between the administration, schools, and parents with refugee and migration backgrounds. Furthermore, questions addressed the existing measures already in place and those considered necessary for the future.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, this study employed qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022), following an inductive approach. In qualitative research, two primary strategies for category development are commonly used: the deductive and inductive methods. The deductive approach relies on pre-defined categories derived from existing theoretical frameworks. In contrast, the inductive approach allows categories to emerge from the data itself, without pre-assumed structures, enabling the discovery of novel or unexpected insights (Mayring, 2017, pp. 85–86).

For this study, an inductive category development was chosen to enable an open and data-driven analysis. Nonetheless, a slight pre-structuring was applied at the outset, based on theoretical considerations. This initial framework served as a starting point for the interpretation and was reflected in the structure of the interview guides. The predefined overarching categories can be seen in the subsequent table (table 3):

Table 3. Data extract and equivalent code

Data extract	*Coded theme*
"I expect them to take an active role in their children's educational development and to be involved, to show interest, and occasionally ask questions. It's not about understanding the academic content, but about demonstrating genuine interest." (T4, l. 39-42)	Expectations
"I think a lot is being demanded here in terms of expectations. I was lucky that my children understood everything quickly and haven't had any problems so far, but I know it can be very different. Especially when there are language difficulties, you first have to understand the instructions before you can even begin to solve the task. I've also cut back a bit on the first language instruction, simply because it's becoming too much for the children."(P2, l.61-67)	Experiences and challenges
"I wish for my son to receive support. Since he doesn't speak German very well yet, I hope that people will be patient with him. The teacher doesn't have much time for each child, but I hope she takes time for him so that he can learn the language." (P3, l. 62-65)	Suggestions and wishes

During the inductive analysis process, these initial categories were further refined and expanded. New subcategories emerged from the participants' statements, which were summarized, condensed, and thematically

grouped. Each unit of meaning was assigned to a suitable category, reducing the material to its essential content (Mayring, 2022, n.p.).

This approach facilitated a systematic yet interpretative reading of the interviews, allowing not only explicit but also implicit meanings to be identified. Such a process contributes to intersubjective comprehensibility**,** ensuring that findings can be verified by other researchers (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019, pp. 633–634). The final set of categories functioned as analytical tools that guided the structuring and interpretation of the qualitative data.

Subsequently, the identified categories were related back to the theoretical framework of the study. This ensured that the findings were not only grounded in empirical evidence, but also theoretically supported**,** enhancing the scientific validity and relevance of the research (Mayring, 2015, pp. 85–86).

To evaluate the degree of consistency in the coding process among multiple researchers, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was applied as the statistical indicator of inter-coder reliability. This metric adjusts for the possibility of agreement occurring by chance, offering a more precise measure of actual concordance. The coefficient ranges from -1 (complete disagreement) to 1 (perfect agreement), with higher values reflecting stronger alignment between coders.

In this research, the Kappa values for the coded interview data fell between 0.75 and 0.85 across the four core categories: expectations, experiences and challenges, suggestions and wishes, and best practice examples. According to the interpretive framework of Landis and Koch (1977), these values represent substantial to almost perfect agreement, indicating that the coding scheme was clearly defined and consistently interpreted by the coding team.

Nonetheless, a lower agreement level was noted in the 'suggestions and wishes' category, where the Kappa value dropped to 0.68. This slight reduction in consistency is likely due to the complex and overlapping nature of participant statements in this domain—many responses touched upon issues that spanned multiple thematic boundaries, particularly between curricular and extra-curricular contexts. In response, the research team engaged in further calibration and discussion, leading to targeted refinements in the coding definitions to enhance clarity and precision.

Taken together, the high levels of inter-coder agreement confirm that the thematic analysis process was both systematic and reliable, thereby reinforcing the credibility and reproducibility of the study's findings.

4. Results

The qualitative content analysis of the fifteen semi-structured interviews revealed a complex landscape of experiences surrounding family reunification processes. Through systematic coding and thematic analysis, four distinct but interconnected main categories emerged from the data, each capturing essential dimensions of the participants' narratives and perspectives.

The first category, *Expectations*, encompasses participants' anticipations, hopes, and preconceived notions about the reunification process prior to their actual experience. This category illuminates the often significant gap between what individuals anticipated and what they ultimately encountered, revealing both realistic and idealistic expectations shaped by various sources of information and personal circumstances.

The second category, *Experiences and challenges*, captures the lived realities of navigating family reunification procedures. This category documents the multifaceted difficulties participants encountered, ranging from bureaucratic obstacles and procedural complexities to emotional and psychological challenges that emerged throughout their journeys. The experiences detailed in this category highlight both systemic issues and individual struggles that characterize the reunification process.

Suggestions and wishes, constitute participants' recommendations for system improvements and their expressed desires for how family reunification processes could be enhanced. This category represents both practical suggestions based on lived experience and broader aspirations for more humane and efficient reunification procedures.

The final category, *Best practice examples*, identify positive instances and effective approaches that participants encountered or witnessed during their reunification processes. These examples provide valuable insights into what works well within the current system and offer potential models for improvement and replication in other contexts.

These four categories together provide a comprehensive overview of the family reunification experience from the perspective of those who have navigated this process, offering insights that span from initial expectations through to concrete recommendations for improvement. The following sections present detailed findings within each category, supported by illustrative quotations from the interview data.

4.1 Expectations

The parents' wishes regarding the school show agreement that the child's well-being represents an important aspect. E1 and E3 emphasize that their children should feel comfortable at school, enjoy going there, and learn something. Additionally, P1 and P4 wish for good support from the teachers. P2 highlights that communication via 'SchoolFox' works well and that she therefore feels well-informed by the school.

> *I wish for good management from the school. (P1, l. 24-25)*

The interviewed parents expect a patient and supportive approach from the school, particularly when it comes to language. One parent expresses the wish for more information about the various educational institutions in Austria to facilitate decision-making. Two parents indicate that they are satisfied with the current support and express no further wishes or measures.

> *I have to say that I find the program in Austria really intense. I think it's a lot, especially in the first grade. (P2, l. 53-54)*
>
> *I find that a lot is demanded here in terms of requirements. I was lucky that my children understood everything quickly and haven't had any problems so far, but I know it can be different. Especially when you have language problems, you also have to understand the instructions before you can even solve the task. I've also eased up a bit with the first language instruction, simply because it becomes too much for the children. (P2, l. 61-67)*
>
> *I wish that my son gets help. Because he doesn't speak German so well yet, I want them to be patient with him. The teacher doesn't have so much time for each child, but I wish that she takes time for him and that he learns the language. (P3, l. 62-65)*

In this context, none of the interviewed parents indicated having heard of the federal education directorate (i.e. Bildungsdirektion) or corresponding school authority services.

The collaboration with the teacher at school is described as positive by all parents. All parents emphasize that communication with the teacher works well, and most parents find SchoolFox particularly helpful:

> *When something doesn't fit, we get called. When I have questions, I get a quick answer and we also communicate well via SchoolFox. (P2, l. 85-87)*

P3 notes that misunderstandings have already occurred due to the language barrier. However, P3 finds that SchoolFox with its translation function is a helpful tool that is always used:

> *Misunderstandings often occur because I can't speak or understand the language so well. That's difficult. I've now found out that you can translate in the app, I think that's good. (P3, l. 86-88)*

P4 reports about collaboration with an interpreter who is organized by the teacher for parent meetings and thus facilitates communication. Two parents report about family members at parent meetings who functioned as interpreters:

> *I have a friend who went with me and translated. She then talked with the teacher and that's how we communicated with each other. That works quite well. The teacher always gives us tips on what we can do better. (P3, l. 94-97)*
>
> *Sometimes (...) was also there, so the big sister. She then translated everything for me. (P4, l. 85-86)*

Regarding support from other authorities, all parents report that they have received no support whatsoever from external agencies and that the school and particularly the teacher were the only source of support they have utilized.

4.2 Experiences and Challenges

The interviewed teachers formulated different expectations of parents with refugee backgrounds, particularly regarding language barriers, cooperation, and school obligations. The teachers expect active participation in school events as well as a fundamental interest in the child's academic development. This also includes the willingness to actively contact the teacher and to take advantage of measures recommended by the teacher.

Several teachers emphasize the importance of linguistic communication. It is expected that parents at least make an effort to acquire basic language skills or organize support through interpreters or family members. According to the respondents, language barriers represent a major challenge, particularly during parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or communication via SchoolFox.

Another important point is the reliability of parents regarding organizational obligations. Examples cited by the interviewed teachers include punctual pickup and drop-off of children, compliance with school obligations, or timely sick leave notifications. T3 emphasizes that regular school attendance and compulsory education are not taken seriously enough by some parents.

T4 highlighted the necessity of a differentiated consideration of refugee or migration experiences when addressing this question. She believes that parents with refugee experiences in particular are often confronted with additional challenges, which is why understanding and patience are required. At the same time, she points out that parents who have been living in Austria for a longer time and are second or third generation should be held more accountable, as they already know the school system and the required obligations. The expectations are illustrated by the following quotes:

> *I expect at least good cooperation, that the parents are equally motivated or committed to learning our language and essentially lead by example for the child. I know it's difficult, but the child has an easier time when the parents participate. (T1, l. 41-44)*
>
> *I expect them to actively participate in their children's academic development and also contribute, that they show interest and also ask questions sometimes. It's not about them having to understand content in the school context, but that there is genuine interest. (T4, l. 39-42)*
>
> *Or they just don't come to parent-teacher conferences at all because they don't have anyone to translate. (T1, l. 64-65)*
>
> *That they take the contact points that the teacher recommends to them seriously and possibly also implement them. The teacher is an expert in this case who gives a recommendation. Like with a doctor. I would probably listen to the doctor there too. I also expect this from parents, that the image of a teacher is elevated and that they take it seriously. (T4, l. 50-55)*

With regard to the support from the superior education directorate (i.e. Bildungsdirektion), the interviewed teachers expressed mixed experiences and formulated concrete improvements While some teachers positively highlight existing measures, such as German language support courses or provided materials and workshops, others criticize the inadequate linguistic and organizational support from the education directorate.

> *So regarding language support, there is great support with the so-called German support classes and German support courses. (T3, l. 77-78)*
>
> *Then there were also the Vienna Educational Opportunities. A lot of money was invested in Vienna to promote and finance various projects and workshops in the classes. I selected a workshop to promote cultural exchange and strengthen the cohesion of children from different backgrounds in the class. (T3, l.92-96)*
>
> *I think they should talk to the teachers themselves, and not just with selected ones they personally know. You could do it like in court proceedings, you get a letter and are chosen to report your experiences. (T1, l. 90-93)*

Several teachers criticize that one is often confronted with new students with refugee and migration backgrounds without further assistance and must independently search for solutions.

> *It is expected that you take care of everything and somehow manage everything. They put the child in your class and that's it. I honestly don't expect anything. (T2, l. 66-68)*
>
> *So from the education directorate, I have not personally received any support in this regard so far. I'm being completely honest now. It was always like, you're getting the child now, it's in your class and that was it. (T1, l. 69-71)*

T1 suggests establishing a fixed minimum number of hours for language support, as the current regulation is not very effective. Another central issue is the lack of provision of interpreters. It is noted that teachers often have to search for linguistic solutions themselves, while systematic and uniform support is lacking. T3 suggests that school management should be more involved in organizing translation services.

> *Yes, regarding interpreters, I would like more support. Maybe more information could be given about where, how, what. Maybe you could also tell the school management so they can mention it in the conference. Otherwise the information doesn't get passed on either. (T3, l. 106-110)*

Some teachers demand better staffing, especially in overcrowded German support classes. Supporting specialists should be deployed.

> *What I think would still be missing are Arabic teachers, since we have very many children in the school who speak this language. That's missing in my opinion, especially after the large refugee wave in 2015, there should have been more. (T4, l. 83-86)*

T4 also suggests introducing more mandatory intercultural training for teachers at schools with a high proportion of children with refugee and migration backgrounds. This should lead to greater awareness of the special challenges facing these children and families.

4.3 Suggestions and Wishes

The parents expressed various views on the necessity of additional support from authorities. While some parents emphasize that they do not need further support, P2 highlights that early information brochures about the school system and school decisions regarding future educational paths would be helpful. It is noted that many parents do not know this information and must rely on social media. P3 also sees a need for better explanations of the school system in Austria.

> *I would wish that one knows how the school works –[someone] to explain the school system. (P3, lines 140-141)*

> *I'm used to researching a lot and somehow found the information online. Many parents don't know this and maybe take information from Facebook. (P2, l. 133-135)*

Additionally, some parents emphasize that they would like special parent evenings for newly immigrated families or contact persons to be better informed about important processes in everyday school life:

> *I would wish that there is more information. We were lucky with the family that helped us, but others don't have that. […]. That would be good if that would also exist for other families. Otherwise, they feel abandoned. (P3, l. 150-153)*

To improve cooperation between schools and parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, a central point was mentioned, namely learning the German language. All teachers are of the opinion that parents should attend German courses whenever possible to facilitate or improve communication in everyday school life. Additionally, all respondents report that parents should engage more actively with their children's school routine, for example by regularly checking homework or keeping important appointments. L4 has also suggested that parents could network more with each other to better navigate school life.

> *At least check whether the homework was done and whether it is neat. They don't have to be able to correct it and no one expects that either, but at least make sure the task is there. If they can, then also support, but time-wise that's always difficult. I had many parents who worked a lot. Often at night or until evening, that wasn't possible for them at all. (T2, l. 113-118)*

> *They could attend German courses themselves. That's what I would suggest. Not just until A1 and then stop, but continue learning. This way one could improve the language barrier with the teacher if one can speak German. I always found it exciting when some mothers learned along with the children. With the first and second graders. I always found it beautiful to watch that the mother did the homework along and learned German that way. (T3, l. 195-201)*

The teachers were asked what measures schools or the education directorate could take to support their work. All interviewed persons see a need for action in several areas. L1 mentions, among other things, a well-functioning translation app that should be introduced during school enrollment. Additionally, L2 points to the need for more or better teaching materials for the German as a second language area. L3 wishes for smaller groups in German support classes, as twelve or more children can hardly be taught meaningfully. Smaller groups with a maximum of five children as well as more staff are mentioned as important measures.

> *There are now colleagues who take on psychosocial work as elementary school teachers, even though they haven't learned that. Actually there should be social workers or counseling teachers, but there are too few at the locations. This personnel is missing. (T3, l. 213-217)*

L4 mentions, in addition to these measures, the general appreciation of the teaching profession. She is of the opinion that more recognition as well as better working conditions are needed to counteract the shortage of teachers:

> *You really don't need to wonder when you then have no motivation left and have a burnout. The resources don't fit front and back. I have already had to write a total of eight applications for MA11 (Note 2) this semester, in addition to everyday school life, and conducted countless phone calls with the youth welfare office. That's work that you do additionally and for which you don't get paid. (T4, l.242-248)*

Likewise, the representative of the federal education directionate mentions similar measures to be undertaken:

> *It is important to establish a clear communication channel so that the information is accepted and also implemented. (...). Of course more resources, especially in German language support. More teachers in this area would be desirable. (B1, l. 68-74)*

4.4 Best Practice Examples

Several parents express the desire for better linguistic support, particularly through a translator. P2 suggests introducing a buddy system where older or already integrated children help new students:

> *Maybe special parent evenings for these parents so they understand important information. A contact person would also be an idea. I experienced this with my nephew. It was a girl, she could speak German but also Russian. She did a lot with him, showed him the school and the system and so on. That helped him a lot. (P2, l. 144-148)*

Moreover, it became clear that recreational activities and extracurricular activities play a central role in the integration of newly arriving students according to the educational professionals. It is emphasized that such activities help children become "quickly part of the group through rituals and rules of the group," with buddy systems taking on a supporting role (AS1, l. 61-63)). This was supplemented by the fact that park visits create long-term meeting points that promote social cohesion (AS2, l. 56). The counseling teacher emphasizes that recreational activities like "adventure gymnastics" strengthen group feeling and body awareness, while music courses and dancing both promote creativity and involve parents (AS3, l.75-76). Extracurricular activities, for example in football clubs, not only promote language acquisition but also provide children with a safe environment away from unsupervised parks (AS3, l. 75-76).

From the school social work perspective, the importance of cooperations, for example with other associations, was emphasized, which strengthen children's mental health and provide them with social connection points (SW2, l. 66-69). Furthermore, it is reported that "community games, getting to know the facilities as well as regular games" create security and familiarity (AS2, l. 72-73).

What is more, it was explained that it is important to "create a protected space with clear rules" and that "great value is placed on praise and mutual appreciation" (AS1, l. 87-89).

The counseling teacher relies on existential pedagogy and emphasizes: "Decisive is the attitude of the teacher - to perceive and appreciate the children […] as human beings" (SW1, l. 88-91). The importance of the "role model function of the educational staff" was also highlighted, while the school social worker mentions trauma pedagogy and cooperation with associations to support refugee families (SW3, l. 81-82).

When asked what measures could help families with refugee and migration backgrounds to better navigate school, one teacher responded with an expanded afternoon program with homework supervision.

> *Someone could help with homework and there you also have the environment that speaks German with you. In the afternoon it would be good if the children had something there. Even if it's just for one hour, that would already bring a lot. (T2, l. 135-138)*

T4 mentioned so-called parent cafés or guides with important contact points in different languages as another measure. Mother tongue teachers should take on a stronger role at, for example, parent evenings.

> *There's really no one they can fill out an application for the school. For us, all of this is self-evident, but for these parents it's incredibly challenging. (T4, l. 262-264)*

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore the challenges that parents, schools, and educational authorities face in the integration of students with a refugee or migration background, as well as the forms of support that parents require to meet these challenges. Through qualitative interviews with parents, primary school teachers, and a representative of the educational authority, the analysis revealed a complex interplay of expectations, lived experiences, and institutional responses that must be understood in the context of broader migration, integration, and pedagogical theories.

The category of *expectations* reveals the persistent tension between the normative structures of the Austrian school system and the lived realities of refugee families. Drawing on Migration and Transnationalism Theory (Vertovec, 2009; Faist, 2000; Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt, 1999) , it is evident that many parents operate within multiple cultural frameworks and social reference points. While teachers expect parental engagement and interest in their children's education, refugee parents may struggle with unfamiliar institutional expectations, limited language proficiency, and different understandings of school-family relationships. These mismatches reflect not only cultural differences but also systemic gaps in orientation and support.

Moreover, some teachers in the study expressed frustration about the lack of involvement from refugee parents, a finding that underlines the need for context-sensitive integration strategies that consider the structural barriers parents face, including precarious housing, insecure residency status, or experiences of family separation (Hartinger, et al. 2024; Taft & Aure, 2024).

Consistent with Multidimensional Integration Theory (Ager & Strang, 2008; Heckmann, 2006) , the study demonstrates that educational integration is not solely a matter of language acquisition or academic performance. It is a dynamic and relational process involving emotional, social, institutional, and legal dimensions. The data shows that schools face challenges in meeting the individual needs of students with disrupted educational trajectories, while also lacking clear guidance and long-term resources from educational authorities. The category of *experiences and challenges* brought to light the emotional burden that many refugee parents carry, particularly when their children face difficulties in adapting or when communication with the school remains unclear.

Refugee parents expressed a desire for empathetic, patient teachers who understand their children's language limitations and trauma backgrounds. These findings underscore the importance of attachment and trauma-informed approaches in school settings (cf. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016). Refugee children who have experienced displacement, family separation, or violence may display heightened anxiety or mistrust, which affects their learning and behavior. Teachers often reported feeling ill-prepared to deal with such complexities, pointing to a need for targeted training in trauma-sensitive pedagogy**.**

The study also speaks to the importance of pedagogical responsibility and inclusive education**.** Teachers and school staff are central actors in the everyday integration of refugee students, yet they operate within structural constraints that can limit their ability to act inclusively. The findings suggest that successful integration relies not only on individual teacher commitment but also on institutional frameworks that promote inclusion as a collective responsibility. For instance, best-practice examples such as *buddy systems*, *multilingual parent cafés*, and the involvement of *counseling teachers* show how schools can create low-threshold opportunities for connection, support, and participation.

Such practices illustrate how inclusive education can be operationalized in ways that go beyond formal differentiation in the classroom. They provide spaces where trust can be built, informal knowledge can be exchanged, and parents can feel less alienated from the school system. These measures align with the theoretical call for a relational and participatory approach to inclusion.

The perspectives of the educational authority representative highlight the challenges of coordinating integration measures across different levels of the education system. While schools are often left to manage integration tasks autonomously, there is a lack of consistent policy frameworks, inter-agency cooperation, and long-term planning. This fragmentation contributes to the uneven implementation of support measures and reinforces systemic inequalities.

Parents interviewed in this study expressed a clear need for *better orientation*, *language support*, and *more transparent communication* with schools. These needs could be addressed through multilingual materials, interpreter services, and school-based social work. Moreover, the data suggests that family reunification processes—often marked by long waiting periods and emotional strain—have a direct impact on children's school experiences. Educational authorities must therefore consider how immigration and asylum policies intersect with educational outcomes.

Figure 1 highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics within the broader context of migration, integration, and pedagogical theories, emphasizing the importance of tailored support systems for parents navigating unfamiliar educational landscapes.

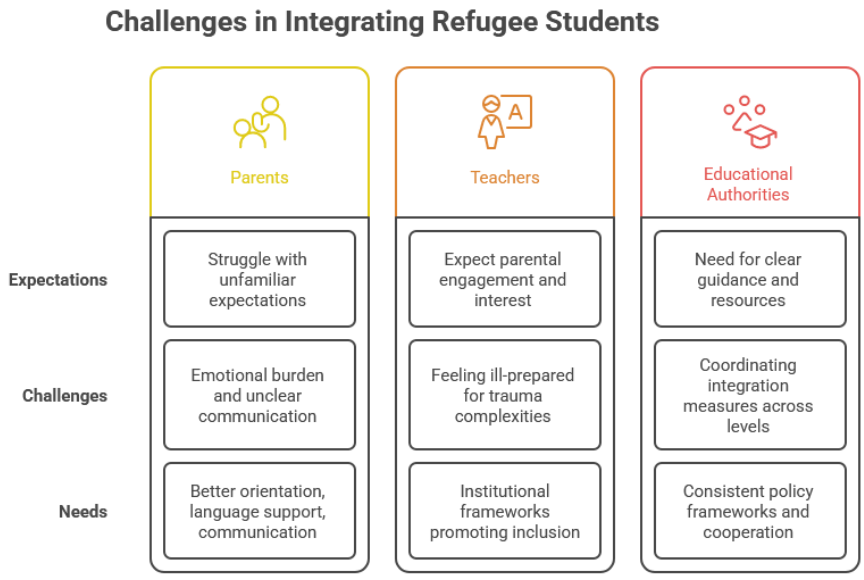

Figure 1. The integration of refugee students from different perspectives

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the multifaceted challenges faced by parents with refugee and migration backgrounds, schools, and educational authorities in the integration of refugee children into the Austrian education system. Using a qualitative approach and analyzing perspectives from parents, teachers, and an educational authority representative, the findings reveal that integration processes are marked by systemic, linguistic, and psychosocial complexities. These intersecting challenges underline the necessity of multidimensional support frameworks that extend beyond classroom pedagogy and into broader institutional collaboration.

Parents face particular difficulties navigating the Austrian education system, often due to language barriers, unfamiliar administrative structures, limited knowledge of school expectations, and the psychological aftermath of forced migration. These challenges are compounded by the lack of culturally responsive communication strategies within schools and limited individualized support. Teachers, while aware of these difficulties, frequently report insufficient resources and professional development to effectively engage families and address students' diverse needs.

To overcome these challenges, parents with refugee or migration backgrounds require clear, multilingual, and culturally sensitive communication, structured orientation support when entering the school system, and opportunities to participate meaningfully in their children's education. This includes multilingual parent-teacher conferences, access to intercultural mediators, and school-based resources such as counseling and community-building initiatives like parent cafés. Schools also benefit from external partnerships with NGOs and community organizations that can bridge gaps in trust, language, and psychosocial care.

The empirical results of this study support the theoretical premise that integration must be understood as both contextual and relational (Ager & Strang, 2008; Heckmann, 2005), embedded in everyday interactions within institutional settings. This is consistent with the trauma-informed lens applied to school settings, emphasizing the role of secure relationships and predictability for children and families recovering from displacement (Brunzel, 2021).

Importantly, the findings resonate with the policy recommendations of Herzog-Punzenberger et al. (2023), who propose five strategic areas of intervention: (1) didactic transformation through language-inclusive pedagogy, (2) structural adjustments such as full-day schools and index-based resource allocation, (3) expanded teacher training in intercultural and multilingual competencies, (4) active parental inclusion through guided and accessible communication formats, and (5) collaboration with external educational partners. These areas not only respond to systemic shortcomings identified in this study but also offer concrete pathways for implementation at both policy and practice levels.

In conclusion, the integration of refugee and migrant children in Austrian schools hinges on the provision of inclusive educational structures and targeted support systems that empower parents as educational stakeholders. Without sustained investment in culturally responsive frameworks and cross-sectoral cooperation, schools risk reinforcing exclusionary practices that hinder long-term educational equity. Future research and policy must

therefore prioritize the co-construction of inclusive environments that recognize and harness the linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources of refugee families.

References

Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *21*(2), 166-191. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016

AIDA (2023). *Country Report: Austria.* Asylum Information Database.

Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1979). Infant–mother attachment. *American Psychologist*, *34*(10), 932-937. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.932

Austrian Ministry of the Interior. BMI. (2025). *Bundesregierung stoppt Familiennachzug.* Artikel Nr: 27861. Retrieved from https://www.bmi.gv.at/news.aspx?id=5A73512F766E7163774C413D

Bhabha, J., Crock, M., & Lenzerini, F. (2014). *The right to family reunification for refugees in Europe.*

Bogner, A., Littig, B., & Menz, W. (2014). *Interviews mit Experten: Eine praxisorientierte Einführung* (4th ed.). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-19416-5

Bonjour, S. (2017). The role of the state and the architecture of family migration policies in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *43*(2), 164-181.

Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2011). *The Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools.*

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment.* Basic Books.

Brunzel, S. (2021). *Traumapädagogik in der Schule: Grundlagen und Praxis einer traumasensiblen Schule*. Beltz Juventa.

Bryceson, D., & Vuorela, U. (2002). *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks.*

Derluyn, I., & Broekaert, E. (2008). Unaccompanied refugee children and the role of family reunification. *Child & Family Social Work*, *13*(3), 267-276.

EMN. (2020). *Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals in the EU.*

Faist, T. (2000). *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198293910.001.0001

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

Gläser, J., & Laudel, G. (2010). *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse* (4th ed.). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91538-8

Gruber, M., & Nowak, M. (2021). *Schule als Integrationsort? Bildungserfahrungen von geflüchteten Kindern in Österreich.* Vienna: Böhlau.

Guild, E., & Grant, S. (2010). *Migration and asylum in Europe: The impact of EU law on national legal systems.*

Hartinger, S. M., Palmeiro-Silva, Y. K., Llerena-Cayo, C., Blanco-Villafuerte, L., Escobar, E., Díaz, A., … Romanello, M. (2024). Housing and health for people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds: Findings from an Australian qualitative longitudinal study. *BMC Public Health, 24*, Article 18616. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18616-5

Heckmann, F. (2006). *Integration and integration policies: IMISCOE network feasibility study*. European Forum for Migration Studies.

Heinze, T. (2013). Qualitative Interviews in der Forschung. In *Forschungsreader zur qualitativen Sozialforschung* (no page number available).

Herzog, W. (2013). *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Einführung für Pädagoge*n (no page number available).

Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Ratzenböck, V., Neugebauer, P., & Pessl, G. (2023). *Migration und Mehrsprachigkeit. Maßnahmen zur Förderung chancengerechter Bildung in Österreich*. Studie im Auftrag des Bundesministeriums für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (BMBWF). Retrieved from https://bmbwf.gv.at

Kohli, R. (2007). *Social work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-62575-4

Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2022). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computer-unterstützung* (5. Aufl.). Beltz: Juventa.

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, *33*(1), 159-174. https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310

Mayring, P. (2017). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (12th ed.). Beltz.

Mayring, P. (2022) *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken* (13th ed.). Beltz: Juventa. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37985-8_43

Mayring, P., & Fenzl, T. (2019). Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. In N. Baur, & J. Blasius (Eds.), *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung* (2nd ed., pp. 633-648). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-21308-4_48

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2016). *Creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools: A system framework*. Retrieved from https://www.nctsn.org/resources/creating-supporting-and-sustaining-trauma-informed-schools-system-framework

Pastoor, L. d. W. (2015). The mediational role of schools in supporting psychosocial transitions among unaccompanied young refugees upon resettlement in Norway. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *41*, 245-254. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.10.009

Patton, M. Q. (2003). Qualitative evaluation checklist. *Western Michigan University. The Evaluation Center.* Retrieved from http://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists

Portes, A., Guarnizo, L. E., & Landolt, P. (1999). The study of transnationalism: Pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 22*(2), 217-237. https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329468

Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., & Goenjian, A. (1996). Traumatic stress in childhood and adolescence. *Direction in Psychiatry*, *16*, 73-82.

Rousseau, C., *et al.*. (2001). Trauma and extended separation from family among Latin American and African refugees in Montreal. *Psychiatry*, *64*(1), 40-59. https://doi.org/10.1521/psyc.64.1.40.18238

Saldana, J. (2016) *The Coding manual for qualitative researchers*. California: Sage Publications Inc.

Schmidt, C. (2018). Das problemzentrierte Interview. In U. Flick (Ed.), *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch* (pp. 51-61). Rowohlt.

Taft, L., & Aure, C. (2024). *Integration and urban citizenship: A social-psychological approach to refugee integration through active constructions of place attachment to the city*. *Political Psychology*.

UNHCR. (2018). *Family Reunification: A Protection and Integration Tool.*

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927083

Notes

Note 1. In order to ensure anonymity among the participants as well as transparency, a three-tier system has been applied; while the first letter indicates the role of the person (B = school authority/Bildungsdirektion, P = Parent, T= Teacher, S= Social worker; AS=after-school educator), the first number indicates the specific parent, teacher, social worker, etc. (i.e. 1, 2 or 3), the second number indicates the line number of the transcript, this quote can be encountered.

Note 2. Municipal Department of the City of Vienna – MA 11 – Office for Youth and Family Affairs