

VICTORS NOT VICTIMS! ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH WITH REFUGEE CHILDREN: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

ABSTRACT

The aim of this systematic literature review was to identify ethical challenges in educational research with refugee children. Utilizing a systematic review of a descriptive type, 16 journal articles, extracted from three social sciences bibliographic databases, and through additional backward and forward searches, were selected on the grounds of the set criteria. The selected articles were then analyzed using document analysis of an inductive type. The results of the analysis point to the existence of specific ethical challenges in educational research with refugee children, related to language barrier and the position of refugee children in research. Keeping in mind the way the identified challenges were addressed in the analyzed research, ethical choices in future research involving refugee children as participants should be approached creatively, flexibly, and reflexively.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, and especially in recent years, as a result of various conflicts, primarily the war in Syria and the invasion of Ukraine, there has been a significant increase in the number of people forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in safer countries. Children account for approximately 40% of all forcibly displaced people and are at risk of a prolonged life in exile (UNHCR, 2021.). Thus, their integration into host societies, and more importantly into educational institutions in host countries presents a high priority. Available data on refugee education shows that refugee children face various obstacles in education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015.; OECD, 2019.). These include language barriers, interrupted schooling, challenges in adjusting to a new education system and new school culture, loss and trauma, poor physical and/or mental health, discrimination, and many more (Dryden-Peterson, 2015.; OECD, 2019.). Therefore, special attention should be given to their educational needs, which calls for more research on their inclusion in educational institutions. It is, however, important that this research is done not only from the perspective of the adults who care for refugee children but that it also includes the perspectives of refugee children. Namely, although adults, such as refugee children's parents and educators, are responsible for ensuring their best interests, and represent reliable sources on the needs of the children they care for, refugee children are experts in their own lives and should in research be regarded as such. Therefore, research that includes refugee children's voices has the potential to contribute to a holistic and authentic understanding of their experiences and needs. This is in accordance with *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which in Article 12 refers to the right of the child »to express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child«, and thus also the duty of adults to ensure that right (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1993.). However, given the fact that refugee children represent a particularly vulnerable group of children (OECD, 2019.), the participation of refugee children in research must be approached with special care and responsibility. This puts ethical considerations of refugee children's participation in research at the center of researchers' attention.

The need for special ethical safeguards in research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants has recently been recognized by the European Commission, which issued a guidance note regarding such research (European Commission, 2020.). The note provides ethical guidelines for researchers conducting research involving this particularly vulnerable group in terms of both *general principles* and *specific concerns*. General principles thus include treating research participants with care and sensitivity, safeguarding their and their family and friends' dignity, well-being, autonomy, safety and security, respecting their values and the right to make their own decisions, avoiding ethnocentricity, and giving special protection to parti-

cularly vulnerable migrant subgroups, such as unaccompanied minors (European Commission, 2020.). Specific concerns listed in the note involve recruiting researchers with a migrant background or of the same culture, ensuring full understanding of the implications of participating in the research, strategic planning for helping participants regarding incidental findings that need to be reported to authorities, ensuring that procedures related to refugee or asylum-seeking status are not in any way influenced, and handling personal data in a way that prevents possible stigmatization, social exclusion or racism, as well as the misuse of the data (European Commission, 2020.).

The distinction, and often the tension, between generalized ethics, typically incorporated into codes of research ethics, and ethical considerations specific to refugee and/or migrant groups of research participants has also been recognized by the researchers dealing with children's participation in research (Kaukko, Dunwoodie and Riggs, 2017.; Bailey and Williams, 2018.; Castillo Goncalves, 2020.; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2020.). For example, Bailey and Williams (2018.: 362) single out *access and gatekeepers, consent, reciprocity, and confidentiality* as four »aspects of ethical procedures ... particularly problematic in working with refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia«, while Castillo Goncalves (2020.), Kaukko, Dunwoodie and Riggs (2017.), and Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2020.) point to contextual factors influencing ethical choices in research with refugee children, for example, refugee children's »multifaceted, non-binary realities« (Castillo Goncalves, 2020.: 295) as well as their »changing needs and extraordinary contexts« (Kaukko, Dunwoodie and Riggs, 2017.: 16), such as »mobility, potential vulnerability and migration as a politicized issue« (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2020.: 269).

Given that both formal guidelines and research experiences point to the need for specifying ethical considerations pertaining to the participation of refugee children in research, the aim of this paper is to identify ethical challenges in educational research with refugee children, with *educational research* understood as »empirical research on refugee students' inclusion in formal primary and secondary education in a broad sense«², including, for example, research on refugee students' mental health that measured some important aspects of educational inclusion, such as school connectedness (Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.), or class climate and quality of peer relations (Kevers et al., 2022.). Utilizing a systematic review of a descriptive type, 16 journal articles, extracted from 3 social sciences bibliographic databases (Scopus, ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection, ERIC – Educational Resource Information Center), and through additional backward and forward searches, were selected on the grounds of the set criteria. The selected articles were then analyzed using document analysis of an inductive type. After processing the

2 In general, *educational research* refers to »an organized, professional approach to inquiry« into education with »diverse goals, including the development of theories to explain educational phenomena« (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003.: 1).

results, specific ethical challenges in educational research involving refugee children were identified, and examples of good practices for addressing them were provided.

METHODOLOGY

Aims and method

In this paper systematic review of a descriptive type (Xiao and Watson, 2019.) was employed as a method *to identify ethical challenges in educational research with refugee children*. More specifically, the realization of this aim included the following research questions:

- what ethical challenges, in general, can be identified in the relevant literature on educational research with refugee children;
- which of the identified challenges are specific to research with refugee children;
- what recurrent themes pertaining to these challenges can be identified; and
- what examples of good practice in addressing these challenges are provided in analyzed literature.

The process of the systematic review involved the following steps: formulating the research problem; developing the research procedure; searching the literature; screening the literature for inclusion in the sample; extracting data from the sample of literature; analyzing data; and reporting the findings.

Selection and inclusion criteria

Three bibliographic databases, Scopus, ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection, and ERIC – Educational Resource Information Center were selected for this review on the basis of the following criteria: Scopus was chosen as one of the two main bibliographic databases in academia (Pranckutė, 2021.)³, while ProQuest Social Sciences Premium and ERIC were chosen on the grounds of their content coverage, ProQuest covering social sciences and ERIC education specifically. Additionally, these databases are considered of high relevance in the Croatian educational research area⁴. The criteria for the selection and inclusion of journal articles in the

3 The other one being Web of Science. I selected Scopus and not Web of Science because the majority of comparative studies on databases show that Scopus is wider in content coverage, and that content-wise the two databases highly overlap (Pranckutė, 2021).

4 For example, Scopus is one of the two databases (the second being Web of Science) used as the criterion for

systematic review sample were the following: articles presenting *empirical research on refugee (international protection/asylum seeking, internally displaced, 1st generation involuntary migrant) students' (below 18 years) inclusion in formal primary and secondary education, published in peer-reviewed journal articles between 2015 and present in the English language within the fields of social sciences, education, and psychology*. Both quantitative and qualitative research was included in the sample. The year 2015 was chosen as the starting point of the period of relevance for the topic of the systematic review because it marks a point in the recent history of a significant increase in first-time asylum applications (non-EU) in the European Union Member States⁵, due to the escalation of the conflict in Syria⁶ in mid-2010s. Clearly defining the term *refugee* as a criterion of selection and inclusion of relevant research proved to be somewhat of a problem. *The 1951 Refugee Convention* states that a refugee is a person who, »owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it«⁷, indicating that refugees are »people who have successfully applied for asylum and have been granted refugee protection« (OECD, 2019.: 9).

However, I decided to expand this definition to include research with *all forcibly displaced* children, therefore also with children in the process of being granted international protection/asylum. This decision was made on the basis of the fact that many if not all children with the status of applicants for international protection are attending schools, especially in the EU countries where it is stipulated by law that all forcibly displaced children are enrolled in schools within three months upon the arrival (OECD, 2019.). Therefore, the final decision regarding this criterion was to include research with children who were refugees, applicants for international protection/asylum, and internally forcibly displaced migrants, i.e. children with clear indications of forced migration. Additionally, research with mixed samples of both forced and voluntary migrants was also included in the sample of the systematic review. However, research with mixed samples including children without a forced migration background (these were mostly quasi-experimental, ethnographic, and evaluative studies) was not included in the sample, since the participation of

assessing scientific excellence of published articles of the highest rank, while ProQuest Social Sciences Premium (among some other databases) is used as the criterion for assessing scientific excellence of published articles of the second highest rank, according to *the Croatian regulation on the academic titles*: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_03_28_652.html.

5 Eurostat: Statistics Explained, Annual asylum statistics: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Annual_asylum_statistics

6 BBC, Syria: The Story of the conflict, 2016: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

7 UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency: <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

non-refugee children was an elimination criterion in the systematic review.

Procedure and sample

The three selected databases were keyword searched utilizing Boolean operators⁸ in May 2022. These searches resulted in 1070 articles from Scopus, 601 articles from ProQuest Social Sciences Premium, and 208 articles from ERIC⁹, i.e., 1879 articles in total. These articles were then subjected to the first screening for inclusion based on the set criteria. The first screening of the articles included reading the abstract of each article, as well as the methodology part of the article when this was necessary for assessing whether the article in question met the criteria. This resulted in 33 articles that met the criteria, upon which backward (reviewing journal articles referenced in the selected articles¹⁰) and forward (reviewing journal articles that reference the selected articles¹¹) searches were conducted between the end of May and the end of July 2022, resulting in additional 27 articles. In total, 60 articles were selected for the second screening, which was done by closely reading the methodology part of each article. 44 articles that upon closer consideration failed to meet the set criteria were excluded in the second screening. The reasons for this exclusion were the following: not educational research, a sample consisting of students without a forced migration background, a sample consisting of preschool-age children, and a sample consisting of 18+ years of age persons. The described procedure resulted in 16 articles in total selected for the sample of the systematic review (Appendix 1).

With regards to the country in which the research presented in the articles was conducted, 6 articles describe the situation in Australia (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Khawaja and Howard, 2020.; Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), 3 articles in Turkey (Gomleksiz and Aslan, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Alkan and Içen, 2019.; Sekin and Çakir, 2021.), while 1 article each describes the research done in Belgium (Kevers et al., 2022.), Jordan (Kubow, 2018.), Kenya (Wanjiru, 2018.), Lebanon (Karkouti, Wolsey and Toprak, 2019.), New Zealand (Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.), South Africa (Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.), and the United States of America (Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.). It is not surprising that Australia and Turkey are represented in the highest number of the

8 Several combinations of keywords with Boolean operators were tested before the final four combinations were decided upon, on the grounds of providing the most relevant search results: refugee AND education AND methodology AND ethic; refugee AND education AND method; "asylum seekers" AND education AND methodology AND ethic; asylum AND education AND methodology AND ethic.

9 The search result lists were saved either on my accounts in the databases or downloaded as a pdf document.

10 This was done by going through the reference list of each of the 33 selected articles.

11 This was done by Google Scholar searches.

selected articles. Australia has a long history of accepting refugees¹², in addition to which in 2021-2022 there was an increase of 171% in migrant arrivals to Australia compared with the year before¹³, and Turkey has since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis been consistently hosting the greatest number of refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2017., 2021., 2022.), nearly 3.8 million in 2021 (UNHCR, 2022.). With regards to the type of research, 11 articles present *qualitative research* (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.; Gomleksiz and Aslan, 2018.; Kubow, 2018.; Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.; Wanjiru, 2018.; Alkan and Içen, 2019.; Karkouti, Wolsey and Toprak, 2019.; Khawaja and Howard, 2020; Sekin and Çakir, 2021.; Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), 4 articles present *quantitative research* (Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Kevers et al., 2022;), and 1 article presents research with a *mixed-method* approach (Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.). The majority of research presented in the articles used *individual or group interviews*, and/or *focus groups* as data collection tools (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.; Gomleksiz and Aslan, 2018.; Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.; Kubow, 2018.; Alkan and Içen, 2019.; Karkouti, DeVere Wolsey and Toprak, 2019.; Khawaja and Howard, 2020.; Sekin and Çakir, 2021.; Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023; Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), with several of those using various forms of *visual methodology* as an addition to interviews and/or focus groups (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.; Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.; Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.). In 5 articles a *battery of questionnaires* was used (Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Kevers et al., 2022.), while in 1 article data collection tool involved *two creative activities* with children (Wanjiru, 2018.). A summary of the described characteristics of the included articles is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

12 Parliament of Australia: https://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/rp/rp1415/asylumfacts

13 Australian Bureau of Statistics: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/overseas-migration/2021-22-financial-year>

Table 1. Characteristics of articles by country of research

Country	N
Australia	6
Turkey	3
Belgium	1
Jordan	1
Kenya	1
Lebanon	1
New Zealand	1
South Africa	1
USA	1

Table 2. Characteristics of articles by type of research and data collection tool

Type of research	N	Data collection tool	N
Qualitative	11	Interviews and/or focus groups	11
Quantitative	4	Questionnaires	5
Mixed-method	1	Other	1

Data analysis

Document analysis (Bowen, 2009.) of an inductive type was used in this research as a method for data analysis. Bowen (2009.) defines document analysis as a »systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents« (Bowen, 2009.: 27), or more specifically, as an »iterative process« (Bowen, 2009.: 32) involving careful (re-)reading of document data, recognizing patterns in the data, identifying codes and constructing categories, in order »to uncover themes pertinent to a phenomenon« (Bowen, 2009.: 32). For Braun and Clarke (2006.: 82) a theme »captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set«. With regard to deciding which data is important enough for it to constitute a theme, Braun and Clarke’s (2006.: 82) observation that »more instances [of a theme across the data set] do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial«, since in qualitative analysis »there is no hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a

theme« (Braun and Clarke, 2006.: 82), proved to be of special relevance for this review, as not all of the results span across the entire data set, but nevertheless held a prominent place within it.

The first step of the analysis included extracting data pertaining to methodology and ethics from the selected articles, and reading the extracted data in several iterations, with the purpose of familiarizing myself with the data. The second step of the analysis included coding, which involved closely rereading the data, producing codes, comparing them, amalgamating duplicate and similar codes, and finally creating a final set of codes, all the while reflecting upon the whole process. The third and final step of the analysis included developing categories from codes, and then themes from categories. This was also an iterative and reflexive process, guided by the research questions and my »perceptions of broad patterns of meaning across codes« (Trainor and Bundon, 2020.: 14). The described process of data analysis resulted in 6 thematic categories: »Language and communication preceding data collection«; »Language and communication during data collection«; »Rapport«; »Image of refugee child«; »Consent/assent«; »Type of refugee child participation«, organized into 2 themes representing the key ethical challenges of educational research with refugee children: »Language barrier« and »Position of refugee child in research«. The results of the systematic review are presented and discussed in the remainder of the paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the aim of the paper focused on ethical challenges *specific* to the participation of refugee children in research, the results of the inductive document analysis are presented within the 2 generated themes, reflecting key challenges specific to educational research with refugee children: »Language barrier« and »Position of refugee children in research« (Table 3). In addition, different ways of addressing these challenges, designated as examples of good practice, are also presented.

Table 3. Overview of the systematic review results

Themes	Categories	Codes
Language barrier	Language and communication preceding data collection	Consent/assent-language barrier Translating/interpreting information and consent/assent forms Simplifying and adapting data collection
	Language and communication during data collection	Linguistically sensitive data collection tool Interpreting Feedback from a refugee child
Position of refugee child in research	Rapport	Building trust Cultural mediator-rapport Familiarizing with participants Attentive data collection
	Image of a refugee child	Vulnerability Anti-deficit
	Consent/assent	Parent/legal guardian consent Refugee child assent Ongoing assent
	Type of refugee child participation	More voice to a refugee child Active role of a refugee child

Convincingly one of the most prominent ethical challenges in the analyzed educational research with refugee children is represented by the first theme developed in the systematic review – **language barrier**. This challenge relates to the various issues before, during and after data collection pertaining to language use and communication with research participants (and their parents/legal guardians) who do not speak the same language as the researchers. Preceding data collection, the most important challenge detected in the analyzed articles involves the question of how to best provide refugee children and their parents/legal guardians with information about refugee children’s participation in research, to ensure that the obtained assent by the participating children and consent by their parents/legal guardians was truly *informed*. This was for example recognized as a challenge by Sutton, Kearney and Ashton (2023.), who decided not to include children younger than 16 in the sample of their study, because »participants under 16 would have required parental consent which may have been difficult to acquire due to language limitations« (Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.: 8). Apart from being determined by understanding relevant information before the participants’ direct involvement in research, informed consent/assent is also dependent upon the participants’ un-

derstanding of what they are being asked during data collection, which points to a fuzzy line between research ethics and methodology. As exemplified by Kaukko, Dunwoodie and Riggs' (2017.: 18) question regarding such research tools that »can be used to ethically, responsibly and critically create knowledge about refugee children without homogenising, essentialising or romanticising them«, ethical considerations are inherent in the choices of research approaches and tools. Examples from the analyzed articles of having to adapt the data collection process due to linguistic challenges involve Sutton, Kearney and Ashton (2023.) simplifying the items in their research instrument, using »only statements which used basic language« (Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.: 7) in an online survey they conducted in their mother tongue with the participants for whom this was a second language, and Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott (2018.) including only the participants »proficient in [the researchers' mother tongue] to the extent that they were able to engage in an everyday communication process« (Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.: 43). Other examples of overcoming challenges related to language and communication include employing the help of translators (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2020.; Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), who translated information sheets and consent/assent forms into participants' mother tongues, and/or interpreters (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Kubow, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Khawaja and Howard, 2020.), who for example »were briefed about the study and their role and were requested to interpret questions as accurately as possible. They were instructed to translate using words that most accurately reflected the meaning of the question« (Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.: 359). Besides interpreting as close to verbatim as possible, immediately sharing the participants' responses, thus »enabling [the researcher's] direct interaction with the [participants] and opportunities for immediate clarification, elaboration, and follow-up questions« (Kubow, 2018.: 39), as well as asking the participants' feedback about the data in order for transcripts and interpretations »to be checked for accuracy of their views and also representation« (Alkan and Icen, 2019.: 270-271) also proved to be useful strategies for addressing language barrier. The researcher can likewise play an important part in ensuring the success of the interpreting process, by assuming an active role in it: »prior to administering each scale, interpreters were asked to explain the Likert forms. The researcher facilitated this explanation by showing the participant the corresponding visual cues« (Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.: 359). Furthermore, a couple of researchers (Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.) employed the service of telephone interpreters, while Gömleksiz and Aslan (2018.) conducted their research with the help of bilingual students. Finally, linguistically sensitive data collection tools, namely arts-based methods and identity texts (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), photo-cued focus group discussions and interviews (Mendenhall, Bartlett

and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.), and nonverbal assessments (Khawaya and Howard, 2020.) were also used. Similar strategies of enabling communication, namely facilitation by third-party persons such as interpreters, teachers, friends, community leaders, community workers, international office workers, and members of local organizations, and use of visual language and media such as photographs and videos, were identified in Alghamdi's (2022.) qualitative systematic review of literature on acquiring informed consent among refugee and immigrant participants in mental health research. However, even though linguistic adaptation of consent forms and data collection tools represents a crucial prerequisite of refugee children's informed participation in research, Cortés et al. (2010.: 178), drawing conclusions from their study with Spanish-speaking research participants, warn that the complexity regarding ethical concepts such as confidentiality, risks and benefits, as well as lack of familiarity with the concepts and consenting procedures »appeared to be a more important barrier to comprehension than semantic or syntactic issues«. Given the developmental trajectory of children's cognitive abilities, grappling with complicated and abstract ethical concepts poses even greater challenges when, along with the parent's / legal guardian's consent, refugee children's assent is obtained. One way of addressing this issue is by carefully approaching refugee children in research, the second most prominent challenge detected in the analyzed educational research, represented by the second theme uncovered in the systematic review – **position of refugee children in research.**

The position of refugee children in research is influenced by researcher-child rapport, the image of refugee child held by the researcher, the way the researcher approaches consent/assent, and the type of refugee participation in research. In general, positive researcher-participant rapport enables the participants to feel relaxed and comfortable as well as to talk truthfully and freely (Harden et al., 2000.), thus contributing to the credibility or truth value of the research results (Wanjiru, 2018.). In the analyzed research, researchers employed various strategies for rapport building, some of which addressed cultural differences between researchers and participating children. For example, Amina, Barnes and Saito (2022.), as well as Wanjiru (2018.), paid special attention to building trust with their participants, the former also employing the help of a gatekeeper, »a reputable member of the refugee community« (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.: 6). Similarly, Khawaja and Howard (2020.) conducted their research with the help of an interpreter assuming the role of a cultural mediator. Others (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2018.; Kubow, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Wanjiru, 2018.) spent time (from a few days to up to five months) familiarizing themselves with the participants in their schools and classrooms. Wanjiru (2018.) for example explained that conducting pre-activity meetings facilitated their »access into pupils' life spaces« (Wanjiru, 2018.: 7). The positive and respectful attitude of the interviewer, including taking time to build trust by spending time with the children hel-

ping them with homework or joining them in social activities, proved to be an effective strategy for facilitating refugee children in sharing their life stories in other studies as well, as shown in Van Os et al.'s (2020.) systematic review of barriers and facilitators for refugee children's disclosure in research. The same review pointed to the feelings of mistrust and the need for self-protection on the part of the refugee children, along with disrespect from the side of the host community, as the main barriers to sharing their stories and experiences with the researchers (Van Os et al., 2020.). Rapport, especially in the contexts of cultural differences and vulnerability, is also shaped by the way the researcher approaches refugee children in the data collection process. Amina, Barnes and Saito (2022.), for example, used drawings or identity texts as research instruments and found them suitable for representing one's identity and belonging, and »powerful in promoting equality and empowerment for learners who are socially marginalised« (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.: 5). The authors also relied on the advice »on how to best approach the participants and respectively collect data« (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.: 7), given by the translator »who had established strong relationships with newly arrived refugee families« (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.: 6). The way the researcher approaches vulnerable groups such as refugee children in research is further influenced by the image of the refugee child. *Image of the child* is a concept explored in the field of childhood studies, where it is typically defined as »a key public image reflected repeatedly through different pictures, creating a typology and meaning in the collective public consciousness« (Holland, 2004.: 3-4, cited in Pressler, 2010.: 16). Given that their life circumstances and experiences are strongly shaped by displacement and the need for humanitarian aid, vulnerability terminology permeates international principles and standards on the rights of refugee children (Şahin Mencütek, Karal and Altıntop, 2021.), thus strengthening the image of the refugee child as vulnerable in the public consciousness. This image of the refugee child was recognized and addressed in a couple of analyzed articles. For example, Wanjiru (2018.) acknowledged that their research on supporting students most at risk of exclusion could »potentially draw historical feelings of 'victimisation' or new insecurities« (Wanjiru, 2018.: 7). The author hence discussed with the participants their research choices, namely adopting »'nonintrusive questions' targeting more positive rather than negative experiences at school« (Wanjiru, 2018.: 7), assuring the participants of their »position of perceiving them as 'victors not victims'« (Wanjiru, 2018.: 7). Similarly, Sutton, Kearney and Ashton (2023.: 9) paid particular attention to »working alongside a vulnerable population«, but also to »avoiding research with deficit focus« (Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.: 9), by identifying recognition and valuing diversity as key features of inclusion and school belonging. To put it briefly, balancing vulnerability with an anti-deficit perception of the refugee child was important to these researchers, which is in line with Castillo Goncalves' (2020.: 294) deduction »that migrant children's agency and vulnerability are not mutually

exclusive«. The way the researcher sees the refugee child further influences the approach to the consent and type of participation of refugee children in research. In the majority of the analyzed research (Due and Riggs, 2016.; Khawaja, Ibrahim and Schweitzer, 2017.; Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.; Kubow, 2018.; Tozer, Khawaja and Schweitzer, 2018.; Alkan and Icen, 2019.; Khawaja, Allan and Schweitzer, 2020.; Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.; Amita, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), child assent was obtained alongside parent / legal guardian consent. However, in some (Karkouti et al., 2019.; Kevers et al., 2022.) only parent consent was stated as acquired. Even though children under 14-18 years of age are generally not legally authorized to give informed consent, children's participation rights, rooted in the human-rights perspective, grant refugee children the right to express their opinions regarding their participation in research. This perspective informed the *Croatian Code of Ethics for Research with Children* (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike, 2020.). In the Code, the child's assent is given priority over the parent / legal guardian's consent, as reflected in its first principle of informed consent in research: »Before conducting the research, it is necessary to obtain the informed consent of the child, and when the Code prescribes thus, also the informed consent of the parent/guardian or special guardian of the child« (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike, 2020: 11). In addition, the Code postulates that in qualitative research the child's consent is a process of continuous observation of verbal and nonverbal reactions of the child indicating their desire to continue or withdraw from research and not a one-time act. Of the analyzed articles, only one explicitly reported on child assent as ongoing (Due and Riggs, 2016.). Finally, the position of the refugee child in research is dependent upon the type of child participation in research. Two distinctive approaches to refugee child participation were detected in the analyzed research: more voice to refugee child, and active role of the refugee child in research. Both the expression of refugee children's voices, as well as their more active participation in research were in a couple of the analyzed research supported by the use of specific research methods and tools. Amina, Barnes and Saito (2022.: 6) used arts-based-methods to allow »the young learners [...] to express their opinions through their own arts-based interpretations«, while Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott (2018.: 43) used the photovoice technique, for which the »participants were given disposable cameras and requested to take photos that would convey the story of their schooling lives, past and present.« Regarding supporting refugee students to engage more actively in research, similar methods were used by some researchers. Namely, Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher's (2017.) use of visual methodology aimed at not only facilitating the expression of refugee children's schooling experiences, but also at positioning them as producers of knowledge. Similarly, Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott (2018.) used narrative interview technique focusing on foregrounding narratives or stories that supported the participants in their meaning-making roles.

These kinds of approaches represent a step forward towards the use of participatory methodology with refugee children, which, while beneficial as a means of emancipation and empowerment (Cullen and Walsh, 2020.), poses further ethical challenges related to power, risk/benefit ratio, remuneration, empowerment etc. (Cullen and Walsh, 2020.), not explicitly present in the research analyzed in this systematic review, and thus left for consideration in future similar reviews.

Limitations

The most prominent limitation of this systematic review is the exclusion of articles presenting research such as quasi-experimental, ethnographic, and evaluative studies, due to samples in these kinds of research being comprised of both refugee and non-refugee children. There was a significant number of such studies among articles generated by the conducted searches, which is why future similar reviews should focus on those studies. This is especially important given that observation, a data collection procedure typical of most of the said studies, poses specific challenges regarding research ethics, such as acquiring consent when the research focus is on everyday life in schools and classrooms. It should also be noted that methods used in the analyzed research (predominantly employing questionnaires and interviews) represent *extracting data type of participation of children and young people in research* (Cuevas-Parra, 2021.), so focusing on research utilizing what Cuevas-Parra (2021.) calls *children and young people as researchers type of participation*, more in line with children's participation rights, should be done in future similar reviews.

The second most significant limitation of this systematic review is the potential bias of the researcher that is me. To mitigate bias and ensure greater reliability of data, future systematic reviewers should work in collaboration.

Further limitation concerns focusing only on journal articles, which possibly left out valuable data published in gray literature (reports, theses, and conference proceedings) (Xiao and Watson, 2019.), thus probably resulting in publication bias (Kitchenham and Charters 2007., cited in Xiao and Watson, 2019.). If the sample included different types of publications, other ethical challenges in research with refugee children might have been detected, for example, those related to participants experiencing distress during research related to their traumatic experiences, identified by other researchers (Castillo Goncalves, 2020.; Gaywood, Bertram and Pascal, 2020.).

The focus on *educational* research and not *all* research with refugee children poses another limitation of the conducted review. This focus was chosen because of my own interest in research in education, while the inclusion of research with refugee children done in other fields in future analyses will ensure a bigger pool of

data and hence its greater reliability. However, it is reasonable to assume that ethical challenges recognized in educational research with refugee children provide a useful basis for reflecting upon possible ethical challenges in research with refugee children in other contexts as well.

CONCLUSION

The results of the systematic literature review point to the existence of specific ethical challenges in educational research with refugee children, summarized in this paper as the challenges related to the language barrier and the position of refugee children in research. Language and communication difficulties both in the process of informing the participants and their parents or legal guardians about the research and in the process of conducting research were in the analyzed studies addressed by translations, interpreting, and simplifying and adapting the data collection tools and procedures. Not undermining the importance of these strategies, future research involving refugee children should be cautious about assuming that they alone guarantee comprehension on the part of the refugee children and their parents or legal guardians. As Cortés et al.'s (2010.) study showed, concepts such as informed consent, confidentiality, risks and benefits, due to their complexity and abstractness, especially for those without experience with them or as research participants, can be more of a barrier to comprehension than poor language competency.

The challenges related to the position of refugee children in research concern the way the researcher builds and develops rapport with the participating children, as well as the way he or she approaches the refugee child's assent/consent and participation in research. Regarding the question of assent/consent, in two of the analyzed research (Karkouti et al., 2019.; Kevers et al., 2022.) only parent consent was stated as acquired. This is potentially problematic (if the participating children were not in fact consulted) because even though most (refugee) children are not legally authorized to give consent, they nevertheless have the right to express their opinions about their participation in research. Therefore, bypassing children in the process of obtaining informed consent should be avoided in future research. Furthermore, given their evolving capacities and specific needs, (refugee) child assent/consent should be regarded not as a one-off event but as a process spanning throughout the whole of research, as exemplified in one of the analyzed studies (Due and Riggs, 2016.). Regarding the type of participation of refugee children in the analyzed research, the researchers used different methods and tools, such as arts-based-methods (Amina, Barnes and Saito, 2022.), photovoice (Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott, 2018.), and visual methodology (Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017.), to support the expression of refugee children's perspectives and experiences, but also to actively engage them in research, for example as producers

of meanings and knowledge. Finally, the image of the refugee child, embedded in researcher positionality and thus with the potential to influence research choices, is shown as important in some of the analyzed research (Wanjiru, 2018.; Sutton, Kearney and Ashton, 2023.). These researchers recognized vulnerability as inherent in the dominant image of the refugee child and employed different anti-deficit strategies to ameliorate that kind of perception.

In conclusion, making ethical choices in research involving refugee children as participants should be approached creatively, flexibly, and reflexively. As Bailey and Williams (2018.: 359) point out, when it comes to people from vulnerable groups, procedural ethics »may not have applicability to certain cultural, social and political settings«, which is why they advocate for »continuous ethical reflexivity«, »a higher level of ethical thinking than current procedures allow« (Bailey and Williams, 2018.: 367). Similarly, Kaukko, Dunwoodie and Riggs (2017.: 16) call for »relational ethics« in research with refugee children, which involves »engaging with children and working from the ‘minds and hearts’ rather than fixed ethical guidelines«. Finally, even though this systematic review focused on refugee children in educational research, due to the power imbalance inherent in adult-child relations in general, its results can to an extent be transferred to various other research involving children, especially those focused on other vulnerable contexts, such as alternative care, minority status, and disability.

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POBJEDNICI, A NE ŽRTVE! ETIČKI IZAZOVI U ISTRAŽIVANJIMA ODGOJA I OBRAZOVANJA S DJECOM IZBJEGLICAMA: SUSTAVNI PREGLED LITERATURE

SAŽETAK

Cilj je provedenoga sustavnog pregleda literature bio identificirati etičke izazove u istraživanjima odgoja i obrazovanja u kojima su djeca izbjeglice participanti. Analizom dokumentacije induktivnoga tipa analizirano je ukupno 16 znanstvenih članaka koji prezentiraju istraživanja odgoja i obrazovanja s djecom izbjeglicama kao sudionicima, ekstrahiranih iz triju relevantnih bibliografskih baza podataka u društvenim znanostima i putem dodatnoga backward i forward pretraživanja te selektiranih na temelju unaprijed postavljenih kriterija. Analiza je rezultirala identifikacijom nekolicine specifičnih etičkih izazova u istraživanjima odgoja i obrazovanja s djecom izbjeglicama, povezanih s jezičnom barijerom i položajem djeteta izbjeglice u istraživanju. Imajući u vidu načine na koje su identificirani izazovi u analiziranim istraživanjima adresirani, etičkim izborima u budućim istraživanjima koja uključuju djecu izbjeglice kao sudionike treba pristupati kreativno, fleksibilno i refleksivno.

Ključne riječi: prisilne migracije; odgoj i obrazovanje izbjeglica; dječja participacija; etika istraživanja; sustavni pregled



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