



Key issues for the effective integration of mental health and psychosocial support approaches in education

Introduction and background

Children and youth with refugee or asylum seeker background, face many hazards and complex situations. These situations range from financial to legal, social, cultural, and economic constraints, all of which are jeopardizing these children's right to education, and therefore their prospects of dynamic integration.

Data from UNHCR indicates that globally 77% of refugee children attend primary school, only 31% of refugee youth access secondary education, and a mere 3% access tertiary opportunities¹, which is a substantially lower rate than their peers. Besides, students of migrant backgrounds are also more likely to dropout and underachieve².

However, existing evidence also shows that this reality can be reversed by promoting **quality education, well-being and a sense of belonging** among these children. These elements are not only essential to all children's development. They are especially important for a successful dynamic integration in new homelands and communities.

Therefore, **education is critical for safety reasons, social inclusion and stability, social and emotional health and represents one of the most effective strategies to promote the integration of migrant children.**

REFUGE-ED addresses the pressing challenge of improving the dynamic integration of children from recent migration cohorts, including those residing in hotspots and reception centres, from both arriving and receiving communities through improved and research-based educational and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) outcomes.

Leveraging from previous projects funded by the EU Framework Programme of Research and Innovation, REFUGE-ED identifies, evaluates, and implements existing evidence-based practices in

¹ World Bank and UNHCR. 2021. The Global Cost of Inclusive Refugee Education. Washington, DC: World Bank. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

² European Commission, (2020). The EC Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027), Brussels, available at: European Web Site on Integration -European Commission (europa.eu)



education and MHPSS that have shown to promote the educational success, well-being and sense of belonging of children.

Key findings

During its first year the REFUGED-ED project, has generated three main contributions:

- A selection of effective practices and approaches from the fields of education (including formal, non-formal and informal education), and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) that are efficiently contributing to the successful dynamic integration of children from recent migration cohorts, children of refugees and asylum seekers, and unaccompanied minors in schools and on the broader society’.
- A study of schools which, despite being in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods and having high rates of migrant and ethnic-minority children, have provided evidence of academic and well-being improvements of all students (including migrant and refugee) against all odds;
- Key guidelines on how to better integrate MHPSS and education in practice.

Effective practices and approaches in MHPSS and education

The effective practices and approaches in MHPSS and education have been selected based on a set of common criteria. Among these criteria, two of them stand up for their substantive component.

First, all the selected approaches and effective practices have demonstrated social impact. In other words, there is scientifically endorsed evidence that when these approaches and practices have been used to inform policies or actions, improvements have been accomplished - when compared to the initial scenario- towards achieving a societal objective. These societal objectives are defined in relation to benchmarks that enjoy a wide societal consensus (e.g.: UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals).

Secondly, these practices were selected based on the expertise of the REFUGED-ED consortium to guarantee the feasibility of training and providing support to the implementation of the approaches and practices. In doing so, REFUGED-ED capitalizes on previous research experience of partner organisations in both fields. MHPSS partners bring expertise from projects like H2020 FOCUS, H2020 STRENGTHS and H2020 RE-DEFINE³. Partners in the field of education have brought expertise from the identification of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in the FP6 INCLUD-ED, H2020 SALEACOM, Steps4SEAS or Enlarge (Erasmus Plus), among others^{4,5}.

The effective approaches in MHPSS presented are:

1. Creating a Safe Space;
2. Capacity building;
3. Cognitive Behavioural therapy;
4. Expressive Therapy; and,

³ For more information, visit: [FOCUS -addressing the challenges of forced displacement \(focus-refugees.eu\)](https://focus-refugees.eu), [STRENGTHS Project -STRENGTHS PROJECT \(strengths-project.eu\)](https://strengths-project.eu), [Re-Define Project -Refugee Emergency: Defining and Implementing Novel Evidence-based psychosocial interventions \(re-defineproject.eu\)](https://re-defineproject.eu)

⁴ For more information, visit: [Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education | INCLUD-ED Project | FP6 | CORDIS | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://cordis.europa.eu) [SEAs4all -Schools as Learning Communities in Europe, SEAs, 4all -Schools as Learning Communities in Europe, SALEACOM Project -SALEACOM Project \(medishub.net\); 13 INCLUD- ED Book on SEA.pdf \(schooleducationgateway.eu\)](https://seas4all.eu).



5. Psychological Staff in Schools.

The effective practices identified in the field of education are:

- Dialogic Literary Gatherings;
- Interactive Groups;
- Educative Participation of the Community;
- Family education;
- Dialogic Pedagogical Education for teachers; and
- Dialogic Conflict prevention and resolution model.

Schools against all odds

Students from deprived areas, with immigrant or ethnic minority backgrounds and with parents with low levels of education often experience that they are expected to fail and that this course is set and cannot be reversed. When the surroundings do not expect a child to succeed, it can have long-standing and highly negative consequences on their actual performance.

Moreover, the blame for this (expected) failure is often put on the children themselves without considering whether the children receive the same standard of education as their more privileged peers or if they receive a watered-down, low-quality standard education.

This creates what is known as the *self-fulfilment prophecy of educational failure* among non-academic families. It feeds prejudices and stereotypes towards these groups and makes it easier for schools to avoid holding themselves accountable and responsible for their own results. Furthermore, these discourses are also found in non-formal education settings working with these groups leading to devastating consequences for the life prospects of these children and youth.

There is solid scientific evidence on how these types of schools can achieve academic success⁵. The key to improving future opportunities for these groups of children and youth is knowing how the negative discourse and situation can be reversed.

The REFUGE-ED project has conducted two qualitative case studies in schools that – despite fitting this profile – have gone against the odds and achieved exemplary success in improving academic achievement, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

The two selected schools implement Successful Educational Actions and outperform other similar schools.

The researchers looked at the practices (WHAT) and their implementation process and procedure (HOW). The study reveals that practices such as Family Education contribute to breaking the self-fulfilling prophecy and increase the family's and the children's academic expectations while promoting role models for students. Other practices like Tutored Library or Literary Groups improve academic success.

Implementing these practices enhances the wellbeing of the children and community because it requires contact and collaboration between the school and the families. The families get to know each other, which breaks down stereotypes and improves co-existence between refugee/migrant families and families from the hosting community.

At the same time, families and students feel supported by the school and they support each other leading to enhanced peer support. A key factor in improving social belonging is the horizontal relationship established between families and schools through these actions. This is highly appreciated by families, who see that they are welcomed, and their voices considered. Visibility and

⁵ Flecha, R., & Soler, M. (2013). Turning difficulties into possibilities: Engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(4), 451-465. Garcia Yeste C, Morlà Folch T and Ionescu V (2018) Dreams of Higher Education in the Mediterranean School Through Family Education. *Front. Educ.* 3:79. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2018.00079



representation of cultural differences in the school enhance integration and inclusion of families, a feeling which is also intensified through participative mechanisms.

Key factors contributing to the success of the schools:

- A. Strong commitment to only implementing evidence-based practices with evidence of social impact.
- B. Meaningful involvement of the community in co-creation processes is seen as crucial.
- C. Acknowledgement of the importance of multiple and diverse interactions
- D. "High quality and high expectations" as a shared goal for the whole community
- E. Reaping the benefits of diversity through inclusive education with a reallocation of resources without segregationist practices.
- F. Extension of the learning time.

Key issues in the integration of MHPSS and education

The close connection between education and mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of refugee and migrant children is clearly acknowledged by international organizations, governments, civil society and research. Education in emergency situations is widely acknowledged as a pathway to promote safety, a stable environment and restoring a sense of normalcy, dignity, and hope for individuals, families, and communities⁶.

Education systems play an important role in providing positive learning environments for children in crisis, and for these reasons, schools have been identified as potentially protective locations for MHPSS interventions in humanitarian settings⁷.

The negative effect of lockdowns on education and psychosocial wellbeing of students and their caregivers across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores this perspective. The pandemic has shone a light on how isolation and disconnect between children and schools can have negative effects on mental health.

These findings reinforce the importance of promoting policies and practices which combine both instrumental knowledge and well-being in education. Practices aimed at facilitating the successful integration of children and families with refugee or migrant backgrounds involve ensuring access to quality education and healthcare services. These measures can significantly bolster the resilience of refugee children and contribute to their overall well-being and positive social integration.

Policy implications and recommendations

These policy recommendations aim to create an inclusive and evidence-based approach to education and MHPSS, involving all stakeholders and promoting the well-being and academic achievement of children while reducing disparities in educational outcomes.

1. Accessible dissemination of evidence-based practices:

Develop mechanisms to ensure that evidence-based educational and MHPSS practices are readily accessible and understandable for all citizens. This includes creating user-friendly resources and

⁶ UNICEF (2021) Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Children in Humanitarian Settings: An Updated Review of Evidence and Practice

⁷ Kamali, M., Munyuzangabo, M., Siddiqui, F. J., et al. (2020): Delivering mental health and psychosocial support interventions to women and children in conflict settings: A systematic review. *BMJ Global Health*, 5, e002014; Kohrt, B. A., Asher L., Bhardwaj, A., Fazel, M., Jordans, M. J. D., Mutamba, B.B., Nadkarni, A., Pedersen, G. A., Singla, D. R., & Patel, V. (2018). The role of communities in mental health care in low- and middle-income countries: A meta-review of components and competencies. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15, 1279; UNICEF (2021) Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Children in Humanitarian Settings: An Updated Review of Evidence and Practice



information dissemination channels, such as the Brokering Knowledge Platform created in the REFUGE-ED project.

2. Inclusive co-creation processes:

Involve all stakeholders, including children, teachers, professionals, families, local communities, and policymakers, in collaborative and dialogical co-creation processes when designing and implementing policies and actions related to education and MHPSS.

3. Capacity building for MHPSS understanding and skills:

Enhance understanding and skills of MHPSS approaches among all stakeholders, including children, teachers, professionals, families, local communities, and policymakers. This should be part of ongoing education and professional development.

4. Addressing school failure perceptions:

Challenge and rectify misconceptions that link school failure solely to factors like family cultural or ethnic background, socio-economic status, or educational credentials. Promote awareness that success or failure in school depends on the actions and measures implemented within the educational system.

5. Highlighting schools' positive contributions:

Recognize and share success stories of schools, particularly those in underprivileged areas, that have successfully contributed to academic achievement and the well-being of all students. Use these examples to dispel stereotypes and highlight effective practices.

6. Integrated approach to MHPSS and education:

Encourage the development and promotion of integrated practices that simultaneously address MHPSS and educational success. Recognize the interconnectedness of mental health, well-being, and academic achievement, emphasizing that one can positively influence the other.

7. Prioritize children's well-being:

Emphasize the importance of children's well-being as a foundational element for academic success and overall development. Prioritize policies and practices that nurture both well-being and educational attainment.

8. Reduce inequality through holistic approach:

Acknowledge that prioritizing well-being and educational success contributes to reducing inequality. Promote policies that prioritize equity in education and support for all students, regardless of their background or circumstances.

9. Monitor and evaluate:

Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of these policies and practices. Continuously gather data to ensure that they are effectively promoting educational success and well-being.



About REFUGE-ED

www.refuge-ed.eu

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Further reading

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