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Shifting the paradigm of teaching migrant and refugee children: inclusive welcome practices for ECEC

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we seek to reconceptualize early childhood education and care (ECEC) for migrant and refugee children through the lens of teachers' positionality, and funds of knowledge. Our study adopts an ethical, power-conscious approach that integrates the diverse backgrounds of children within pedagogical practices. It further incorporates play-based, trauma-informed, child-centered, and community-cohesive approaches as a foundation for inclusive teaching practices in ECEC. Drawing on Rayner's (2017) Natural Inclusion theory, as introduced by Gaywood (2023) in refugee studies, we argue that the natural social inclusion of migrant and refugee children is essential for broader social evolution and change. This theoretical framework is complemented by the concept of "Welcome," an introductory theme of our Educational Toolkit, which was developed and trialed for ECEC teachers and practitioners across five countries: England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland. The Toolkit's evaluation assessed how welcoming practices facilitate natural inclusion and foster classroom interaction. This paradigm shift in the education of migrant and refugee children aims to enhance current models of teacher professional development by promoting pedagogical strategies that address the needs of diverse child populations. Our findings contribute to reshaping teacher's practices and advancing a more inclusive and equitable approach to early childhood education.

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Introduction

The number of children displaced due to war or violence reached 20 million in 2023 (UNICEF, 2024), thus, exacerbating the growing number of migrant children worldwide. The number of the displaced children in the early years (aged 0–4) has grown from 6 million in 2010 to 8 million in 2020, while children aged 5–9 years – from 7 million to 10 million respectively (United Nations Population Division, 2020). The increasing number of internationally displaced children poses a growing need for inclusive education, which is particularly important in the early years of children's development.

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Within early childhood education, however, research about refugee and migrant children¹ remains insufficient to support ECEC teachers in their teaching practices (Gaywood et al., 2020; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2019; Tobin et al., 2013; Wihstutz, 2020). Therefore, many teachers still struggle to implement and run effective pedagogical approaches. This is also due to numerous factors, including the evolving nature of migration and refuge, which affects diverging children's needs, scarce knowledge of inclusive and multicultural pedagogy, and trauma-informed education. This referred to both countries with relatively long experience of working with migrant and refugee children (e.g. England, Australia, Turkey, or Greece), and those where teaching ECE migrant and refugee children became a relatively new issue (e.g. Poland).

As such, this paper aims to reconceptualize the pedagogical practices in ECEC for migrant and refugee children, advocating for a paradigm shift toward more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching approaches. The paper draws on the Natural Inclusion theory (Rayner, 2017), introduced to the refugee studies by Gaywood (2023), to accentuate the need to change the pedagogical approach toward teaching migrant and refugee children. Inclusion as a term and concept is problematic as it is imbued with multiple underlying ideologies and meanings that often obscure historical and problematic power relations (Wexler, 2016). The “includer” assumes a position of power and authority to determine who is “included” and on what terms. This creates a hierarchy of relations by default where refugees and migrant children are categorized and positioned differently regardless of efforts to make them feel welcome in the setting. By drawing on Rayner's (2004) theory of natural inclusionality, educators may be empowered to resist the categorization of children by shifting focus to the classroom environment and to “perceiving space and boundaries as connective, reflective and co-creative, rather than severing, in their vital role of producing heterogeneous form and local identity” where refugee and migrant children are “included.” Natural Inclusion theory provided a helpful lens through which to examine the educator's evaluations of the Toolkit. Natural Inclusion describes a process observed within the natural world where fungi respond to new species. Rayner (2017) noted that rather than attempt to prevent growth through domination, the fungi instead responded by actively opening up a dynamic space and drawing the new species in.

The five themes identified within the findings: inclusion and equity; recognizing agency; trauma-informed practice; a play-based approach and community cohesion resonate with a Natural Inclusion approach. Natural Inclusion theory Rayner (2017) offers a nonhierarchical view of natural processes which enables newer species their own space for growth. The links to notions of inclusion, equity, the recognition of agency and community cohesion is clear. Possibly less clear are the connections to the theme of trauma and a play-based approach. Natural Inclusion theory is rooted deeply within the natural world (Gaywood, 2023).

We argue that understanding and recognizing trauma within the refugee and migrant child's experience is vital and that a play-based approach is equally important. How the body and mind of a human response to an overwhelming, dangerous event is a natural process (Conkbayir, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to respond to that trauma by understanding how to promote healing through a reciprocal natural response. Equally, we suggest that play is a natural learning state for children. Thus, any educational response has to consider this.

We believe that the implementation of inclusive, trauma-informed, play-based, child-centered, and community-cohesive welcoming practices at both school and prior to school is essential for fostering a safe and supportive environment for the early childhood education of migrant or refugee and host country children. Moreover, inclusive welcoming practices have lasting positive effects, playing a key role in children's long-term development, learning, and social integration. Such practices foster the development of children's identity, enhance their sense of belonging, and encourage agentic behaviors. Finally, we argue that positive experiences of being welcomed within educational settings have a direct impact on strengthening teacher–child–parent and family–school relationships, and, therefore, promoting broader community cohesion.

This paper is based on the theoretical framework that is complemented by the concept of ‘Welcome,’ an introductory theme² in our Educational Toolkit, which was developed and tested for ECEC teachers and practitioners across five countries: England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland. The Toolkit's evaluation assessed how welcoming practices facilitate natural inclusion and foster interaction within classrooms.

This article is structured as follows: First, we highlight the significance of reimagining education by shifting the paradigm toward more inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) teaching. Second, we present the methodology. Next, we integrate our study's findings with a discussion of the existing literature, outlining our contributions. Finally, we conclude the paper with a summary of key insights.

Reimagining education: shifting the paradigm toward more inclusive ECEC teaching

Existing research underscores that beyond social protection and psychological support, which directly influence children's well-being, migrant minors also require uninterrupted access to education (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2024). The UNHCR (2024) reports that only 50% of refugee children attend school, compared to 91% of non-refugee children. Despite recent improvements, refugee children continue to lag behind their peers (ibid). Studies consistently show that across Europe, migrant children perform significantly worse academically than their country-born peers (Darmody et al., 2014). The disruption of the educational process due to migration results in considerable learning losses and exacerbates educational inequalities (Janta & Harte, 2016; Popyk & Pustułka, 2023). Over time, these disparities accumulate and deepen (Dannefer, 2003; Klasen, 1998). Tobin (2020) and Lamb (2020) also highlighted the barriers both children and their parents encountered when trying to access early education whilst other researchers focus on the integration of children and their families into the receiving societies (Gambaro et al., 2021) and other researchers agree of the benefit of early education (Buchmuller et al., 2020).

While these educational challenges are often associated with lower socioeconomic status (Janta & Harte, 2016), economic disadvantage alone does not fully account for the gaps in learning outcomes. Migrant and refugee children often find themselves in vulnerable and disadvantaged positions socially, emotionally, and academically (Devine, 2009; Popyk, 2023). Their academic challenges are compounded by emotional strain, limited cultural and linguistic knowledge, and potential discrimination related to their migration experience (Goździak & Popyk, 2024). These difficulties are particularly acute for children fleeing political instability, persecution, war, or other life-threatening conditions (Ensor & Goździak, 2016).

Educational inequalities for young migrants are likely to worsen when schools are unable to provide equitable educational opportunities or when institutional disruptions hinder their capacity to support learning effectively (Darmody et al., 2014). Equally, ECEC settings need to interrogate pedagogical approaches to ensure refugee children's social and emotional needs are considered as part of an overarching approach to equitable practices (Gaywood et al., 2024).

Acknowledging the critical review by Stevens et al. (2023), which examined the benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision in middle- and low-income countries, this article contends that adequately preparing early childhood educators to sensitively support refugee and migrant children necessitates the adoption of play-based curricula and pedagogical strategies. Essential to this preparation is comprehensive training in trauma-informed practices, enabling educators to confidently and consistently apply these methods. Educators' daily practices should explicitly incorporate inclusive pedagogical approaches that view migrant children not merely as vulnerable individuals but as active, agentic participants whose diverse experiences enrich educational environments. Furthermore, educators should actively involve children's families within the educational process, thereby fostering cohesive community relationships. To support this critical pedagogical transformation, the article draws upon the framework of a "Pedagogy of Welcome" (Gaywood, 2023) and integrates thematic principles of Welcome as articulated in the educational Toolkit (Eccera, 2022).

Methods

The educational Toolkit development

Our research draws upon the evaluation and findings of an educational Toolkit that was developed and tested across five countries: England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland (Eccera, 2022). The aim of the Toolkit, titled, "Inclusive Education for Refugee and Migrant Children"³ was to promote awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by migrant and refugee children – as well as to celebrate the skills and attributes these children bring to enrich the learning experience in their school or ECEC setting.

The ethos of the Toolkit values the rights of all children and considers them to be agentic, unique, and have a voice to be heard. It is underpinned by the belief that learning and development are co-constructed through playful interactions that early years teachers can practice as a means of supporting all children to reflect upon their individual experiences and those of their peers. The activities suggested provide the teachers with ideas to develop and differentiate within the context of their setting based upon the needs and interests of the children. The Toolkit aims to facilitate the development of a sense of identity, belonging and an awareness, and appreciation of others.

The Educational Toolkit covers seven different areas (Home, Migration, Fear, Welcome, Climate, Adventure, Empathy, and Compassion). Within the "Welcome" theme, the importance of co-constructing welcoming practices is explored as a means of nurturing empathy and mutual respect, for creating friendships and positive relationships between

children, families, and the educational setting. This study adhered to the EECERA ethical code, which outlines guiding principles for researchers in early childhood studies (Bertram et al., 2016).

The Toolkit evaluation

In 2021 five members (the authors) of the EECERA Special Interest Group (SIG) “Children from Refugee and Migration Backgrounds” developed the Educational Toolkit for ECEC teachers. The Toolkit for ECEC settings was inspired by Good Chance Theater’s Educational Pack for older children, developed for the production “Walk with Amal.” The Toolkit was implemented in eight ECEC settings within England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland. As a means of assessing the suitability and interest of the settings in evaluating the Toolkit, an initial meeting was organized between the authors and educators to discuss timeframes and the importance of the research. The criteria for the suitability related to the age group of the children attending the setting and the setting having the time, resources and staff to implement the Toolkit’s evaluation.

The Toolkit was thus implemented in eight ECEC settings within England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland. An evaluation form was then used to collect the data. The initial section of the form was devised to elicit data relating to the educators experience, length of time working in the profession and their professional qualifications, which encompassed early childhood educators, teachers, support staff, and allied health practitioners, such as youth workers and psychologists. This section of the form also provided information regarding the educators ethnicity, and the age range and ethnic composition of the children in the groups.

The second section of the evaluation form posed the following open-ended questions about each theme in the pack:

- How do refugee/migrant children, participating in the activities, reflect/understand/experience the notion of “home?”
- What was your experience implementing the activities in the section “home?”

Section two then asked the educators for information regarding the strengths and shortcomings of the pack, how the children engaged with the pack, thoughts on the activities and resources suggested, and whether or not the educators made any adaptations to the activities or resources suggested in the pack. They were also asked for any comments or suggestions that could help to improve the pack.

The authors then analyzed the evaluation forms and notes, previously anonymized, using the McGrath (2013) framework. The evaluation criteria were as follows: clarity of instruction, comprehensibility of texts, credibility of tasks, achievability of tasks, achievement of performance objectives, potential for localization, practicality, teachability, flexibility and appeal of materials, motivating power of materials, and impact of materials. The data was then individually analyzed using the thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors then collectively met and iteratively identified the overall themes as detailed in the findings.

The Evaluation of the Toolkit was conducted in two phases, presented below.

Phase I took place in England, Australia, Turkey, and Greece in 2021. The ECEC setting in England was located in a historic city in the SouthWest. Although traditionally the city is considered highly affluent, there are areas of significant generational poverty, which is where the ECEC setting, which tested the Toolkit, is situated. In recent years, the city has begun to welcome more refugees and has seen an increase of migrant families. Due to the low cost of housing available in the area, some families have been housed near the ECEC setting. The setting agreed to test the Toolkit as it had already been educating newly-arrived children and felt the Toolkit could inform their current practice. The ECEC setting is a well-established community-based charitable organization with a specialism in supporting children and their families who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) (Felitti et al., 1998) as well as providing inclusive education for a significant number of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

The ECEC setting in Australia was situated in a multicultural city consisting of newly migrated or resettled children, families, and individuals. People from across the world visit, work temporarily, or may decide to stay due to the climate, lifestyle or to reunite with family who have previously settled. A large cohort of children who participated in the Toolkit had lived in Australia at least for six months before going to school. While educators were largely from migrant backgrounds.

In Greece, the pre-school classrooms were situated in a town located on a populated island with a refugee settlement history dating back two thousand years. While settings were homogenous with teachers who identified as Greek, and children aged four and five years who also identified as Greek, teachers were proactive in connecting with the local community who in turn were supportive to teachers in raising awareness to children of the town's refugee history while fostering humanity, solidarity, and sustainable practices. Between 2015 and 2016, more than one million migrant and refugee people, including young children, arrived in Greece seeking safety from war-stricken Syria and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (Tramontanias, 2023). Challenges for teachers with increasing enrollment of largely refugee children in pre-school classrooms found fostering inclusion was impacted by a lack of refugee targeted pedagogical training and development to build their professional confidence (Megalonidou & Vitoulis, 2022; Mogli et al., 2019).

Aydin et al. (2019) explain that Turkey “hosts more Syrian refugees than any other country” (p. 1031) and many children who arrive are impacted by trauma, sadness, and anxieties. In the school settings in Turkey, allied health practitioners led two small groups in early intervention programs. Practitioners were conscious of not using the term “refugee” and felt spontaneous adaptation to the Toolkit to suit the environment added to the success of Syrian children's inclusion.

Phase II. The second part of the evaluation was held in Poland in April–December 2022 as a response to the growing child migration and refuge in Central and Eastern Europe (particularly in Poland). The Project was financed by the Froebel Trust Foundation⁴ and realized at the Center for Research in Early Childhood (CREC).

Two ECEC teachers in Poland tested and evaluated the Toolkit. Both ECEC settings are state/public kindergartens, located in a city in the North of Poland. Both educators were Ukrainian, who arrived in Poland in February 2022, and started working as cultural/language assistants for Ukrainian refugee children in the ECE settings. The Toolkit was tested for three months, with a different frequency, depending on the ECEC program and relevance of the themes, at average once a week.

Authors' positionality

The authors critically examined and acknowledged their own positionality and its potential impact on the study. The research team, comprising five researchers from three different countries and diverse migration backgrounds EECERA SIG, brings extensive experience in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, specifically in teaching and researching children with refugee and migrant backgrounds in England, Australia, and Poland.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the evaluation of the Toolkit demonstrate the significance of the necessity of welcoming practices in building relationships between school and families, teachers and children, as well as between teachers and parents, and among children. The evaluation forms indicate that the introduction of welcoming activities enhanced ECEC teachers' reflections and approach in need to provide a more inclusive and equitable education for all children.

The thematic analysis of the data identified five interconnected themes that underscore the need to shift ECEC teaching toward a more inclusive, trauma-informed, play-based, child-centered, and community-cohesive approach. This shift aims to address the unique experiences and needs of children from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The following themes illustrate these priorities, including examples of welcoming practices within ECEC settings.

Inclusion and equity in early childhood education

Inclusion is currently characterised by confusion about what it is supposed to be and do; frustration at the way the current climate of standards and accountability constrain teacher's work; guilt at the exclusion created for individual pupils; and exhaustion, associated with a sense of failure and futility (Allan, 2009, p. 1)

Inclusive and equitable education is central to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG4 aiming by 2030 to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). A key target within this goal, SDG4.2, emphasizes access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education to prepare all children for primary education. Complementing this, UNHCR's "Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education" sets a goal of integrating refugees within national education systems to achieve equity and quality. Together, these frameworks underscore the importance of addressing the educational and social inclusion of both newly arrived refugee or migrant children and host community children, aiming to bridge the gap between "us" and "them" and foster a shared sense of belonging.

Research interest in "inclusion" has grown significantly, particularly concerning the educational and social inclusion of refugee and migrant children in a world where migration is increasingly inevitable. Though no universally agreed-upon definition of inclusion exists, Polat (2011) suggests it should span all aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity,

disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, and socio-economic status, to minimize exclusion and marginalization. Since access to education for refugee and migrant children is often uneven due to disrupted opportunities, creating an inclusive learning environment becomes crucial. In such environments, all children have equal access to learning, feel valued and supported, share ownership of the learning process and experience equity in social and educational outcomes.

The experience of refugeeness, as Baker (1983) describes, involves a deep sense of loss, not only of tangible assets but also of intangible, subjective dimensions like status, lifestyle, and familial connections (cited in Gabi, 2013). In the educational context, this may manifest as unresolved feelings of grief and loss among refugee and migrant children. To support these children, educators need to prioritize psychosocial safety alongside physical inclusion. McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021) argue that inclusive practices for children from refugee and migrant backgrounds must actively address issues like racism and Othering, bridging formal and informal curricula to create shared experiences and spaces of commonality (Zembylas, 2020).

The concept of inclusion is nuanced and multifaceted. Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) assert that educational definitions of inclusion often fail to capture its complex nature. They propose operationalizing inclusion through three dimensions: levels of inclusion, arenas of inclusion, and degrees of inclusion, encouraging educators to plan beyond mere numbers and foster connections and a sense of belonging. Zembylas (2019) further argues for reframing inclusion as an ethical process grounded in recognition, relationality, and embodiment, lived and practiced in daily school and classroom life.

This resonates with Rayner's (2017) Natural Inclusionality which emanates from the scientific study of how nature functions through inclusion, not separation. Gaywood (2023) draws on Rayner's natural Inclusionality to offer ways of understanding the natural social inclusion of refugee and migrant children:

Through Darwin's observations of the natural world, he noticed this need to dominate to survive, and through Rayner's scientific work he saw a species creating space for the Other to replicate and increase, but with the same aim: survival. This seemed to be a new way to consider the plight of refugees which went beyond political, socially constructed concepts but were rather rooted in observations made in the natural world. (Gaywood, 2022, p. 76)

Natural Inclusionality, as conceptualized by Rayner, emphasizes the "sustainability of the fitting natural inclusion," which he describes as a "co-creative, fluid dynamic transformation of all through all in a receptive spatial context" (Rayner, 2010, p. 3). This perspective rejects rigid classification, hegemonic thinking, and exclusionary tendencies inherent in anti-natural processes, such as Darwin's "survival of the fittest." Instead, it fosters an approach that values coexistence, mutual support, and adaptability. Practitioners in Turkey did not feel the need to make reference to the refugeeness of children but instead used story books and films to create an environment of connectedness, "We did not use the word 'refugee' a lot with them. As well for the stories and links we used the story of 'the house that's your home' for the other sessions we looked for short films and stories to match with the age of children we dealt with" (Turkey)

The Toolkit's implementation and evaluation reflect this principle, as educators observed that the proposed activities foster inclusivity in multifaceted ways. Not only are the activities adaptable to different contexts, groups, and learning needs, but they also encourage the

inclusion of children with varying abilities. As commented by the UK Educator, “Activities can be adapted for pre-school children if needed and gives me ideas on what activities I can produce for the children to play with. Theme of adventure-having the woodland near my setting has given us a greater experience of having an adventure- making building spaces with tent pegs and cloth” (UK, First Steps). The educators highlighted how the activities helped promote equal treatment of all children, regardless of their migration background or cultural heritage. For instance, educators in Australia noted that listening to suggested songs, reading diverse books, and engaging in inclusive games helped to blur lines between children’s backgrounds, fostering an understanding that everyone is equal and valuable. Recognizing and celebrating different languages and cultural practices created a comfortable environment that strengthened children’s sense of belonging and identity:

The song “People All Around the World Just Like Me and You” helped us learn how to say hello in many languages. We added new words to represent the first languages of educators and children in the group. (Australia)

We argue, therefore, that socio-natural inclusionary practices – ways of thinking, interacting, and teaching – reflect natural processes of kindness, compassion, and valuing differences as strengths. Embedding these inclusive principles within educational practices is essential to nurturing environments where all children feel they matter. By celebrating diversity, promoting equity, and supporting each child’s sense of belonging, educators foster a classroom atmosphere where children see themselves as integral to their learning communities and to one another. For example, in Australia, the theme of climate enabled educators to incorporate ideas of seasons and changes in weather as part of children’s interests, learning and appreciating the Aboriginal cultural experiences

We made a weather chart for the pre-school and incorporated Australian Aboriginal symbols, this helped us to incorporate Aboriginal books about weather which was a wonderful way to embed Aboriginal culture in our daily programs, eg; Big Rain is Coming. (Australia)

Trauma-informed approaches in early childhood education

A trauma-informed approach benefits not only refugee and migrant children but all children, emphasizing the need for ECEC teachers to be equipped with strategies that account for trauma’s impact. To begin, a working definition of trauma is essential, alongside an exploration of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) as outlined by Felitti et al. (1998), whose study highlighted significant correlations between early adverse experiences and long-term health outcomes (p. 246). Gaywood (2022) offers a practical definition, describing trauma as “circumstances that children might experience during which they may feel very overwhelmed or fear for their life” (p. 11), noting that such experiences can impair learning due to the brain’s shift into a survival mode. This understanding aligns with neuroscience advances applied to early childhood education (Conkbayir, 2021).

The concept of ACES, encompassing factors such as “school and community violence, natural disasters, forced displacements, and war, terrorism, and political violence” (Goddard, 2021, p. 146), has gained significance following WHO’s 2018 study across global contexts, illustrating ACES’ widespread health impact. Chronic stress can severely affect a child’s capacity to learn, with physiological and neural effects documented by Goddard (2021), Pervanidou et al. (2020). While migrant and refugee children face unique

adversities, Woolgar et al. (2022) note that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in young children is widespread.

Significantly, trauma-informed education seeks not only to address the physical or medical impacts of trauma but to foster a more inclusive and safe teaching environment. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA, 2014) six key principles underscore this approach: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; cultural, historical, and gender issues. These principles align with Harris and Falot (2001) five core values of trauma-informed education: ensuring physical and emotional safety, maximizing trustworthiness through task clarity and consistency, providing choice and control, fostering collaboration, and prioritizing empowerment and skill-building. SAMHSA (2014) further identified four core assumptions of trauma-informed care: to realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization. These principles resonate with a pedagogical approach which we believe must also be inclusive, play-based, agentic, and community-oriented.

Feedback from educators using the Toolkit highlighted the importance of recognizing and responding to migrant and refugee children's adverse experiences while preventing re-traumatization. An educator in Greece shared,

The war in Ukraine emotionally affected several children, who mainly through their drawings expressed fear and concern about current events. The fear of war caused the need to tell those who are fighting that there are other ways to resolve their disagreements. So we visited the radio station of Syros "Empneusi 107fm" and recorded messages of peace which are broadcast daily by the radio station. (Greece)

The educational Toolkit, inspired by the Walk with Amal of Good Chance Theater, was particularly effective in embodying the principles of trauma-informed education. Through activities involving puppet, storytelling, and art, educators encourage children to reflect on migration and forced migration, facilitating empathy and awareness among both refugee and non-migrant children. One educator in England noted,

Talking about Amal and her journey, we talked about all the possible difficulties she faced, about her possible feelings and her needs for care, food, water, home, family, love, security. Then, we read more stories about refugees and asked the children to paint ways of "welcoming" people or animals that come from other countries or are refugees or migrants.

Similarly, the educators from Greece mentioned:

On the occasion of the screening of the video of Amal's trip, we discussed "migration." The children showed particular interest in the reasons for the migration of humans and animals. We talked about the reasons why people and animals change place of residence.

Therefore, educators working with refugee and migrant children are encouraged to adopt trauma-informed practices while avoiding reductive narratives that frame these children solely as trauma victims (Gaywood, 2023, p. 84). A trauma-informed approach, as advocated by Woolgar et al. (2022), would therefore benefit all children, a sentiment supported by Sun et al. (2024), who found that trauma-informed practices are not yet fully integrated within ECEC settings in Australia. Recognizing the early adversities many children face, a trauma-informed approach is essential for fostering equitable educational environments (Gaywood et al., 2024).

Play-based approaches in early childhood education

The developed Toolkit is grounded in the Froebelian principle of play as a central ideology (Tovey, 2020), highlighting the importance of play in fostering welcoming and inclusive practices for refugee and migrant children within classroom settings. Play is universally recognized as an innate drive among children, with spontaneous, instinctive play shared across cultures (Bruce, 1993). In culturally diverse ECEC environments, play enables opportunities for cultural and social learning, providing a platform for sharing cultural knowledge (Jarvis et al., 2014; Kirova, 2010). It also supports the formation of friendships and relationships, embodying principles of inclusion and diversity essential for refugee and migrant children (Hyder, 2005). Creating a welcoming and inclusive space within ECEC settings may require challenging discrimination and prejudice. Play offers a foundation to support children in learning about equality, justice, and anti-racism through thoughtfully designed activities (Hyder, 2005).

Therefore, the play-based approach also supports children in building relationships with peers. In our study, educators reported that, following the Toolkit's implementation, children began forming closer and more meaningful connections. One practitioner from Turkey shared an activity in which children discussed essential qualities for friendship, identifying values such as "sharing, love, fun, respect, helping each other." They then crafted bracelets with these chosen qualities.

It is essential, however, to recognize cross-cultural variations in play and how these may manifest across global contexts (Bruce, 2001). Trawick-Smith (2010) emphasizes the need for educators to avoid assumptions that all children will engage in all activities, particularly those that may carry Western cultural biases. He notes that play can support the transitions of refugee and migrant children in ECEC settings, provided it is meaningful to the child's cultural experiences: "For play to work its 'magic,' it must be meaningful to the child, and that includes 'meaningful' in terms of the child's cultural experiences" (Trawick-Smith, 2010, p. 100). In this respect, the role of educators is crucial in creating an inclusive environment that respects and incorporates diverse cultural expressions of play.

Accordingly, the Toolkit offers suggested activities designed for qualified ECEC educators, allowing for local adaptation to ensure culturally sensitive practices. The implementation and evaluation of the Toolkit were carried out by local educators in each setting to enhance its alignment with children's experiences and needs. These educators, who came from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, contributed to avoiding the Westernization of the Toolkit's pedagogical approach.

Supportive adults play an essential role in creating a welcoming atmosphere for children and families in ECEC settings. Effective listening and communication are key, with teachers expected to be attuned to children's needs and interests. Play serves as a medium for such engagement, offering a safe and controlled context for children to process overwhelming emotions (Hyder, 2005). Educators should clearly convey the value of a play-based curriculum to families of refugee and migrant children, emphasizing its role as a crucial tool for learning. Uninterrupted play, allowing children time and space to make sense of their experiences, is particularly beneficial for refugee and migrant children (Tobin, 2024). Play promotes unity, connectedness, and community, helping children to develop a sense of belonging and identity enriched by the diversity of their peers (Tobin, 2024).

To support this approach, the Toolkit provides a variety of play-based activities tailored to diverse contexts. Many educators found the use of the Puppet (a young girl) effective in discussing experiences of migration and forced displacement. Puppetry is a well-established technique for engaging children, particularly those with ACES, in processing complex emotions (Gök & Bozak, 2023). An educator in Australia described an activity in which children traced Puppet's journey by creating footprints from her country of origin to her destination, supplemented by viewing footage of Puppet's travels at various points.

Incorporating a play-based approach in ECEC not only enhances children's engagement and peer relationships but also fosters identity formation and a sense of belonging – crucial elements for migrant and refugee children adapting to a new environment. Grounded in a pedagogy of play, this approach equips educators to meet the needs of refugee and migrant children while promoting inclusive and equitable early childhood education practices.

Recognising agency in migrant and refugee children

While the traumatic experiences of migrant and refugee children require significant attention, current research often prioritizes psychological and mental health concerns, frequently overlooking other vital aspects of post-migration life, such as academic performance, social integration, and the active roles children assume in shaping their educational and socio-cultural contexts (Rutter, 2006). This narrow focus on trauma can inadvertently reduce these children to “medicalized subjects of trauma” (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), which risks ignoring the broader inequalities they face as well as their capacity to contribute actively to their communities and schools (Matthews, 2008).

This trauma-centered approach is also evident in the adult-centric nature of much refugee education research, where children are typically seen as recipients rather than active participants. Studies often focus on teachers' experiences with ethnically diverse classrooms or explore best practices for addressing children's needs, emphasizing the perspectives of adults over those of children themselves (Struzik et al., 2021). Other research focuses on migrant and refugee parents, portraying them as passive in supporting their children's education due to limited cultural capital, legal challenges, and demanding work schedules (Graham et al., 2015). Consequently, children are frequently perceived merely as “objects of care” or victims of inadequate support structures rather than as active contributors to their learning environment.

The adult-centric perspective contrasts with the child-centered framework advanced by Prout and James (1997), which recognizes children as active participants in their own socialization, possessing unique voices and agency (Prout & James, 1997). Unlike the passive “luggage” of migrating parents (Orellana et al., 2001), migrant children often play integral roles in migration-related decisions (Popyk, 2021), navigate new spaces autonomously (Fog Olwig & Gulløv, 2003; Punch, 2000), and maintain essential relationships with family and peers, reflecting their agency and adaptability (Ní Laoire et al., 2008). Embracing a child-centered view requires recognizing these multifaceted roles and valuing their contributions to the social fabric of educational settings.

In addition to acknowledging the agency, a recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of the “funds of knowledge” that migrant and refugee children bring to the classroom (González et al., 2005). This concept underscores the cultural practices, social knowledge, and diverse experiences these children contribute, which traditional

educational models often overlook. Ortega and Oxford (2023) suggest that, while all children bring unique knowledge from their home environments, refugee children's "funds of knowledge" are often especially rich due to their "wide-ranging experiences in multiple places and their encounters with many kinds of people, events, and challenges" (p. 4). Recognizing these contributions can transform the way teachers perceive and interact with their students, viewing them not only as learners but as integral members of their families and communities. This deeper understanding strengthens teacher-child and school-family relationships, enhancing children's sense of belonging and identity (Adair et al., 2012; McDevitt, 2020; Tobin et al., 2013).

Incorporating the funds of knowledge framework into ECEC, challenges deficit-based perspectives that marginalize migrant children's potential. By moving beyond a view of refugee and migrant children as individuals with unmet needs, educators who adopt this approach actively affirm the skills, cultural assets, and strengths these children bring to the classroom.

Our Toolkit supports this shift by encouraging educators to view children as active agents in the classroom, giving them space to express their needs, share ideas, and co-create learning activities. For example, teachers in Greece reported that children took the initiative to create drawings depicting ways to welcome newcomers, with support from a local social cooperative. Their ideas included organizing welcome meals, providing a trampoline for play, and hosting welcoming celebrations. Additionally, children organized a collection of essential items for Ukrainian refugees, fostering a sense of teamwork, solidarity, and empathy among the students. One educator noted:

The collection of food, clothes, toys and medicine for the refugees of Ukraine by the students of our Kindergarten was an action that created feelings of teamwork, solidarity and empathy. (Greece)

A comprehensive understanding of migrant and refugee children's experiences requires integrating a child-centered, agentic approach and acknowledging the diverse funds of knowledge these children bring, educators can foster more inclusive environments that validate each child's unique strengths and perspectives. This approach enables educators to appreciate children's roles in shaping their educational and social contexts, moving from a needs-based focus to a framework that values their contributions. Such a culturally responsive, inclusive framework promotes active engagement and mutual respect in the classroom, benefiting all learners by making the learning environment a space of dynamic interaction and respect.

Fostering community cohesion in early childhood education

Facilitating community cohesion in early childhood educational settings requires a welcoming and inclusive environment where families feel a positive sense of belonging (Gaywood et al., 2024; Hadley & De Gioia, 2008). Hadley and De Gioia argue that this sense of belonging empowers families to contribute to building healthy communities for themselves and their children, enriching children's educational experiences and fostering stronger community connections.

Empowering families is a foundational aspect of cultivating positive relationships within the community (Ife, 2016). Research by Ife highlights that vulnerable families benefit from

inclusive practices, feeling more connected and supported, which enhances their ability to participate in their communities. Conversely, when educators disregard the role of families, a sense of exclusion can develop, weakening community bonds.

However, positioning families as the sole contributors to community cohesion may inadvertently undermine their individuality and agency. Lehrer (2023) caution against this, suggesting that families should be respected and valued for who they are, and for the knowledge they bring, rather than as a one-dimensional solution. Similar findings from Chan and Ritchie (2016) in New Zealand reveal that families with limited English proficiency were often perceived by educators as less invested in their children's education. However, these families were found to be highly engaged with their children outside the ECEC setting, underscoring the importance of viewing families holistically.

Studies further support the importance of systemic approaches that prioritize family involvement in community-building initiatives. Haldane et al. (2019) found that organizations with built-in structures for family engagement achieved greater community cohesion. In a similar vein, Kalfaoui et al. (2020) observed that egalitarian practices in Spanish ECEC settings increased trust among Roma and migrant families, which translated into shared developmental outcomes and strengthened community bonds.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) underscores the necessity of inclusive pedagogical practices, emphasizing that families are intrinsic to the complex relationships within children's microsystems, regardless of the level of direct involvement. Supporting this, the Toolkit provides provocations that encourage educators to welcome all families into the educational process, thus strengthening connections. Gaywood et al. (2024) agree that ECEC settings are well-positioned to integrate families into "pedagogical processes" (p. 543), nurturing bonds that extend beyond the classroom.

During the Toolkit trial in Australia, educators observed natural intersections between themes of "Welcome" and "Migration." These themes created spontaneous opportunities for intercultural dialogue, allowing families and educators to share migration narratives and deepen cultural connections. One educator noted that a sense of "Welcome" evolved into a broader community feeling, with local members connecting with families and learning about the activities inspired by the Toolkit themes. Reflecting on this, the educator shared:

We had a great response from families as most of them were able to connect with the themes. They took time sharing their input in the scrapbook Nursery room sent home with children to share homes. A few months later, we made a greeting chart to respect everyone's rights and wishes. This is now incorporated into everyday practices. (Australia)

In Greece, educators also reported increased family involvement as children's enthusiasm for Toolkit activities resonated with families. This engagement extended beyond the classroom, fostering community cohesion and a collective sense of purpose. Children independently initiated a project to gather and donate items for Ukrainian refugees, an endeavor that instilled optimism and humanity, further strengthening community ties.

The Toolkit also uncovered historical connections to migration for homogenous Greek communities, revealing a refugee history tied to their local island. This unexpected discovery sparked curiosity among children and families, further deepening engagement with the educational content. Themes of "Empathy" and "Home" extended into the broader community as children explored the refugee legacy embedded in their surroundings.

During an excursion, a local architect illustrated how migration had shaped community landmarks, including some of the children's homes, bridging past and present in a meaningful, local context.

In fostering community cohesion, ECEC settings must go beyond traditional methods, recognizing and valuing the diverse contributions of families. By engaging families as active participants and respecting their unique cultural identities and histories, educators can create educational environments that not only support children's learning but also strengthen bonds within the community, creating spaces of shared understanding and mutual respect.

Conclusions

Drawing on Rayner's (2017) natural inclusion theory, we offered ways in which teaching practices in ECEC can promote the educational inclusion of all children through play-based, trauma-informed, child-centered and community-cohesive approaches. Insights from the thematic data analysis highlight the transformative potential of a paradigm shift in ECEC toward an inclusive practice that promotes and nurtures children's agency. The impact of trauma on children's psychosocial, cognitive, learning and development calls for trauma-informed practice that enhances children's relational capabilities and self-regulation skills. We argue that refugee and migrant children's educational outcomes are often impacted on by various structural, interpersonal, and individual factors that interplay with previous experiences and current circumstances. The role of the educator is important in fostering a sense of welcome in learning experiences that instill trust and security for children. Play-based learning allows children to attain linguistic literacy and intercultural cultural competencies that open pathways for connection and belonging in host countries. To support the educational inclusion of all, educators will need to intentionally promote diversity and difference as assets to settings and society.

Limitations and further research suggestions

While this study offers valuable insights into inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) practices for migrant and refugee children, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study primarily relies on qualitative data from educator's reflections on the Educational Toolkit, which, while rich in detail, may not fully capture the perspectives of children and parents. Future research should integrate direct observations of children's interactions and parental perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how welcoming practices impact their experiences. Second, the study was conducted across five countries – England, Australia, Greece, Turkey, and Poland – each with distinct socio-political and educational contexts. While this diversity enhances the generalizability of findings, it also means that some contextual differences may not have been fully accounted for in the analysis. Future studies could conduct country-specific longitudinal research to examine the long-term effects of inclusive pedagogies on migrant and refugee children's academic and socio-emotional development. Finally, while the study highlights the importance of play-based, trauma-informed, and community-cohesive approaches, further research is needed to develop concrete frameworks for implementing these strategies across

diverse ECEC settings. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies evaluating the specific impact of different pedagogical interventions could offer valuable evidence for policy-makers and practitioners.

By addressing these limitations, future research can further advance the development of inclusive, responsive, and culturally sustaining ECEC practices for migrant and refugee children.

Notes

1. We use “migrant” and “refugee” children to refer to children who experienced *transnational transitions* from one socio-cultural and educational setting to another, moving from one country to another. “Migrant children” is used as a general definition of children on move (both voluntary and forced), while “refugee children,” “asylum seekers,” or “displaced children” to underline the forced migration experiences of children, who have being displaced due to various reasons (e.g. conflict, violence, war, persecution, etc.). In this article, we use the terms interchangeably. We recognize that it is more inclusive to refer to the children first, and their experiences second: for example children who are refugees so that the children are represented as agentic and not merely by their circumstances or experience. However, given the word limitations of this article, a pragmatic approach was taken. This footnote explains our thinking and acknowledges that the children are not only defined by their forced migration experiences.
2. By “Welcoming,” we have drawn on the concept outlined by Gaywood et al. (2024) which suggests the importance of creating power sensitive spaces where refugee children are included as equal occupants, without being subject to Othering practices or narratives. Early educators are tasked with examining their own professional positionality as well as interrogating their personal attitudes whilst scrutinizing structural issues to consider power inequities.
3. EECERA SIG, Educational Toolkit “Inclusive Education for Refugee and Migrant Children” <https://www.canva.com/design/DAFSjPEIsRg/view>
4. Froebel Trust. Supporting migrant and refugee children in Early Childhood Education.

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