

Enabling Inclusion of Refugee Children in Preschool Settings

Recommendations from 6 kindergarten teachers

**SPIRAL: School as an institution for Protection and Inclusion of
Refugee children and families**

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**82nd Kindergarten
of Athens**

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Acknowledgments

This booklet was created with the invaluable contributions of numerous individuals dedicated to early childhood education.

Authors:

Paraskevi Kiou, Kindergarten Teacher
Anastasia Karagianni, Kindergarten Teacher
Vasiliki Bevouda, Kindergarten Teacher

Contributors:

Jamila Jalloh, Kindergarten Teacher
Fatima Yusuf, Kindergarten Teacher
Konstantina Mertzani, Kindergarten Teacher

Jamila Jalloh, Fatima Yusuf, and Konstantina Mertzani were among the six kindergarten teachers whose observations were crucial for the making of this booklet during the job-shadowing activities.

Supervision:

Emad Al-Rozzi, Assistant Professor, Oslo Met

Special Contribution:

Anita Berge, Multilingual Advisor, Municipality of Oslo, on the statistics of Part 1 -
Description of the setting

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SPIRAL is a bilateral project aimed at establishing networks between entities in Greece and Norway to enhance knowledge-sharing and practice development in kindergartens. The objective is to identify innovative ways to improve and expand kindergarten services to better address the needs of refugee students and families in urban areas of Athens and Oslo.

SPIRAL is being implemented under the Program II: "Asylum and Migration" (Addressing urgent needs for the reception and screening of asylum seekers and for the accommodation of vulnerable groups), by the 82nd Kindergarten of Athens and its partners, Oslo Municipality and Oslo Metropolitan University.

The "Asylum and Migration" programme in Greece, financed by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, was awarded a total budget of 16,5 million euros as part of the EEA Grants 2014 – 2021. The program aspires to contribute to ensuring legal protection, support and care for the most vulnerable asylum seekers, with emphasis on unaccompanied children. The Fund Operator for the "Asylum and Migration" programme in Greece is SOL Consulting S.A in partnership with HumanRights360.

Introduction

The booklet you have on your screen is an attempt to produce educational material designed specifically for preschool education and is the outcome of an initiative known as SPIRAL. SPIRAL is a bilateral project aimed at establishing networks between entities in Greece and Norway to enhance knowledge-sharing and practice development in kindergartens. The project's objective is to identify innovative ways to improve and expand kindergarten services to better address the needs of refugee pupils and families in the urban areas of Athens and Oslo.

SPIRAL is implemented under Programme II: "Asylum and Migration," which addresses urgent needs for the reception and screening of asylum seekers and the accommodation of vulnerable groups. The project is led by the 82nd Kindergarten of Athens in partnership with Oslo Municipality and Oslo Metropolitan University. Funded by the EEA Grants 2014-2021, the program aims to ensure legal protection, support, and care for the most vulnerable asylum seekers, with a particular emphasis on unaccompanied children under the age of six years.

Our work involved engaging with kindergartens and their community contexts through field activities, including exchange visits between Oslo and Athens. These activities focused on Norway's Søndre Nordstrand District and Greece's Exarchia District, both selected for their similar socioeconomic challenges, cultural diversity, and active community engagement. By sharing experiences and developing inclusive practices, we aim to create a more supportive and effective educational environment for refugee children.

The first part of the booklet describes the settings of both locations where the job shadowing took place, providing readers a better insight. The second part of the booklet contains recommendations that, in our opinion, can help refugee children be better included in educational settings. These recommendations do not aim to encompass all factors influencing the inclusion of pupils with a refugee background. Instead, they offer a distilled collection of observations and reflections drawn from discussions among 6 kindergarten teachers, an assistant professor from OsloMet and a multilingual advisor from Oslo Municipality. These insights emerged from our experiences shadowing kindergarten educators in Oslo and Athens, where we observed practices and noted differences between the preschool education systems in Greece and Norway.



Part 1

Description of the setting



Visiting Oslo and Athens: A Background Overview of the Districts we visited

To ensure that knowledge sharing and practical development are meaningful and applicable across both countries, we decided to directly engage with kindergartens and their community contexts through field activities. These activities included two exchange visits between Oslo and Athens, each involving job-shadowing, walking lectures, and meetings with local communities and stakeholders. Our focus was on Norway's Søndre Nordstrand District in Oslo and Greece's Exarchia District in Athens. These districts were selected for their similarities in socioeconomic challenges, cultural diversity, and active community engagement.

The city of Athens, with a total population of 637,798 registered inhabitants spread across its seven Municipal Districts, includes Exarchia, a densely populated community in central Athens. Exarchia is known for its active community involvement, strong sense of solidarity, and activism. This area has historically been a hub for grassroots organizations and social movements, fostering an inclusive environment, particularly for groups at risk of marginalization, including refugees.

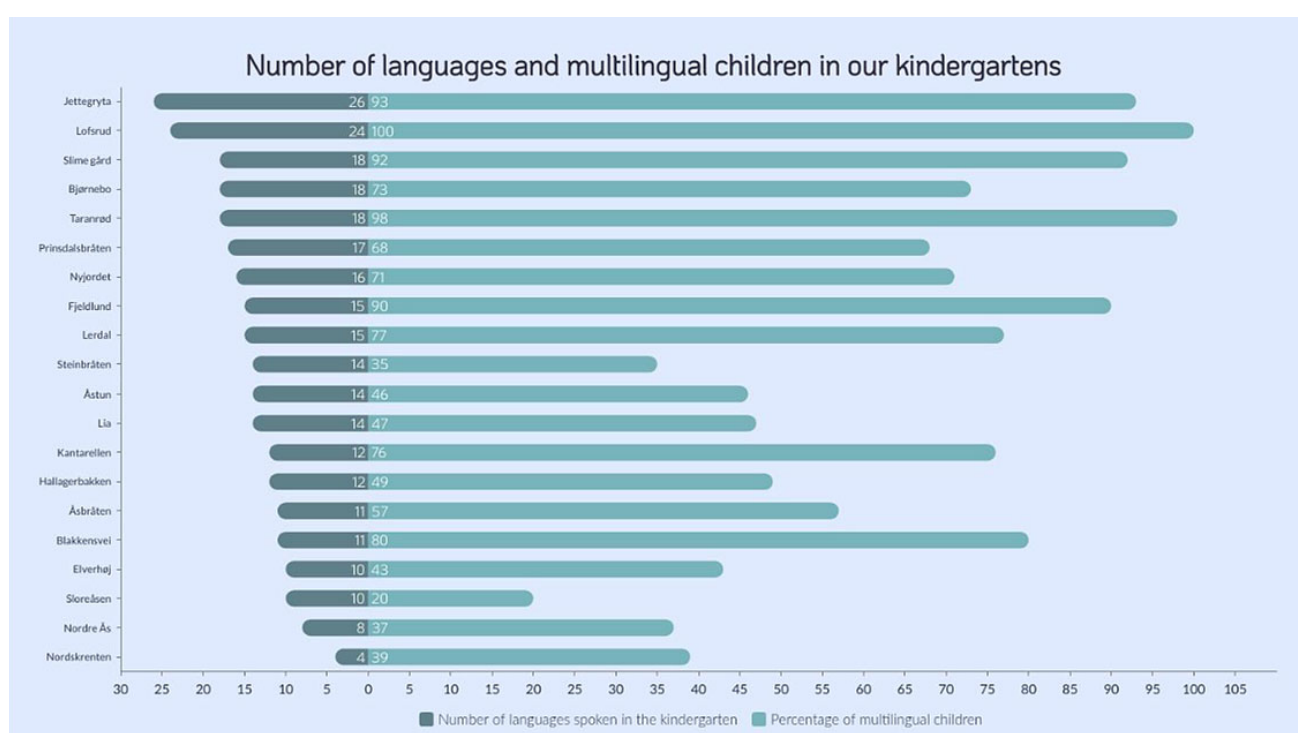


Fig. 1.1

Until recently, Exarchia was home to a significant number of refugee children and families. These families often resided in squats, rented houses funded by their own means, apartments provided by refugee housing programs, and accommodations for unaccompanied minors. Despite systemic issues in Greece hindering refugee integration and exacerbating precarity, refugee children living in Exarchia attended local public schools. Preschool-aged children, in particular, attended the three public kindergartens in the area, including the 82nd Kindergarten of Athens.

In recent years, reductions in housing programs and shifts in migration policy have displaced many refugee families from central Athens, including the Exarchia district, forcing them into camps or more affordable neighborhoods. According to the recent Greek Ombudsman's report, this situation has led to worsening living conditions, including inadequate food provision and interrupted cash assistance, severely impacting refugees' dignity and survival. Many struggle to find employment or access social benefits, thereby increasing their risk of homelessness. Educational challenges also persist, with inconsistent attendance, language barriers, and disruptions from frequent relocations.

Oslo's 700,000 inhabitants are divided into 15 districts. The district of Søndre Nordstrand lies in the south of the city. It is a socioeconomically disadvantaged urban area, with a high percentage of children dropping out of school at an early age. Ensuring inclusive practices in all parts of the education system is therefore especially important in this district.

Many of the kindergartens in Søndre Nordstrand have complex linguistic environments, with as many as 26 languages spoken in one kindergarten (Fig. 1.1.). This is a game changer, where many of the methods taught to pedagogy students—like the use of books in two languages, are harder to do. The linguistic and cultural hyperdiversity calls for new methods and approaches.

A significant share of the staff in the kindergartens have multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (Fig 1.2), and the district is constantly working on developing ways to use their competence and experiences to create inclusive environments

Preschool education in Greece and Norway

Preschool education in Greece is compulsory for children aged 4 to 6 years. The system includes state-funded public kindergartens that are free of charge, along with some private institutions that require tuition fees. The Ministry of Education sets the curriculum, and kindergarten teachers must hold a university degree in Early Childhood Education. In Greek kindergartens, the typical adult-child ratio is approximately 1 adult per 25 children. However, significant economic challenges in recent years, including budget cuts and austerity measures, have impacted public spending across all sectors, including education.

In contrast, preschool education in Norway is optional and serves children aged 1 to 6 years. The Norwegian government allocates substantial public funding to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), ensuring strong support for kindergarten programs nationwide. The Norwegian system is known for its rigorous structural quality standards, including a low kindergarten teacher-child ratio of about 1 adult per 6 children in the 3-to-6 age group. The Ministry of Education and Research issues the national Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens, shaping the curriculum. While most kindergarten teachers hold bachelor's degrees in Early Childhood Education and Care, the system values diversity in professional backgrounds. Municipalities oversee these institutions under national guidelines to maintain consistency and high standards across Norway.

in the institutions. Attending kindergarten is not mandatory in Norway, but a very high percentage of families do choose to attend, over 93%. As shown in Fig 1.3., the percentage of families choosing not to attend kindergarten is significantly higher in this district, pointing to the fact that there is still a way to go before the institutions reach the level of cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness that make them attractive to all inhabitants.

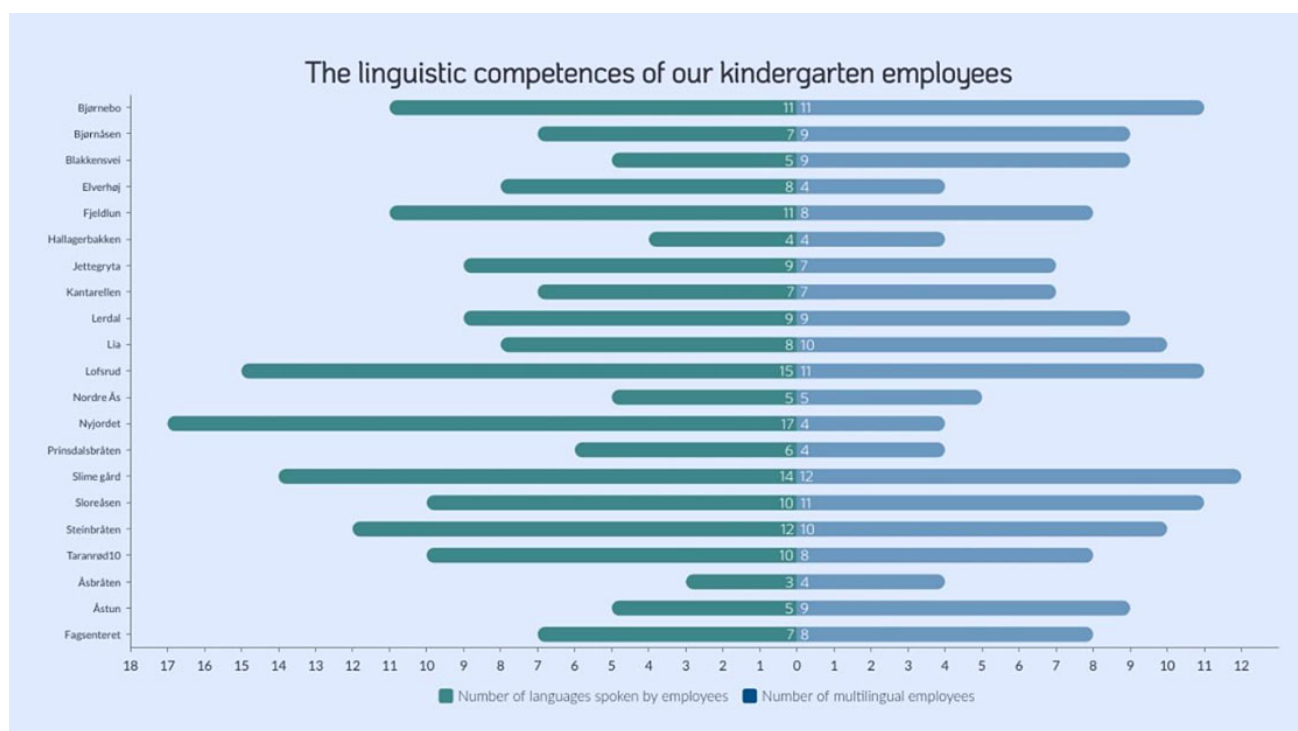


Fig. 1.2

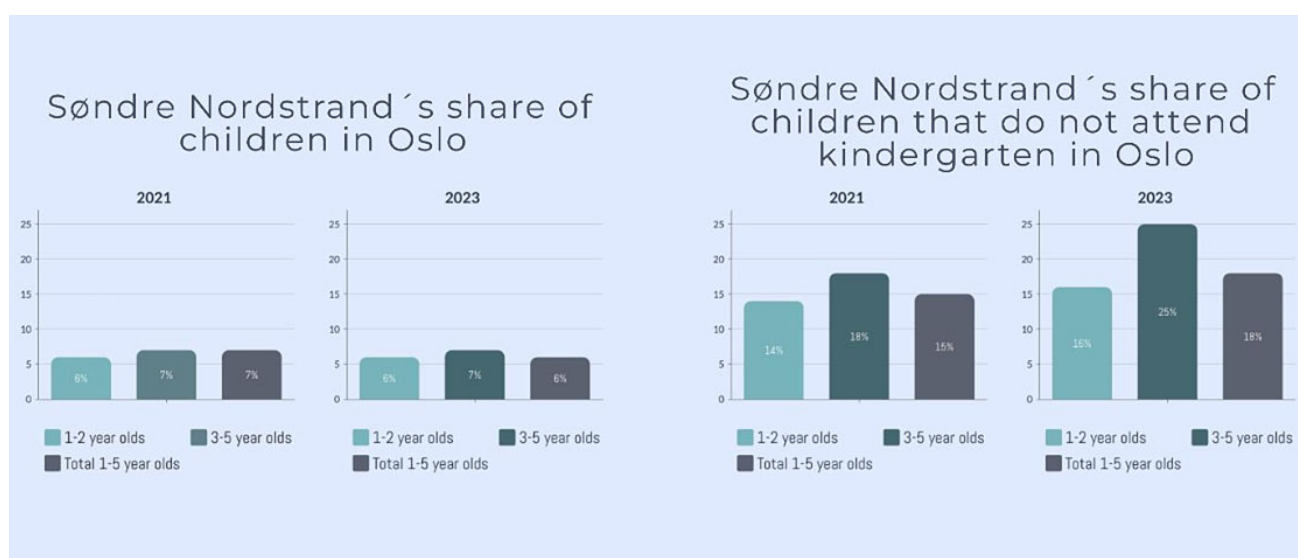


Fig. 1.3



Part 2



Introduction

The following document presents a comprehensive set of recommendations and reflections derived from the observations and job shadowing experiences of six kindergarten teachers in Oslo and Athens. These insights are looked through the lens of the principles of inclusive education and social pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of creating educational environments that support the holistic development and equitable participation of all learners, including those from refugee backgrounds.

The recommendations focus on various aspects of early childhood education, highlighting best practices and strategies that foster inclusivity, emotional well-being, and academic success. These include establishing daily routines that provide structure and predictability, utilizing visual aids to enhance communication and comprehension, promoting the value of free, authentic play, ensuring low teacher-child ratios for individualized attention, adopting a facilitative teaching approach, and organizing structured activities that build teamwork, trust, and empathy.

Through these recommendations, the document aims to provide educators in the field of preschool education with practical guidance on how to possibly provide supportive, inclusive, and responsive educational settings that cater to the diverse needs of all students. By integrating the principles of inclusive education and social pedagogy, the goal is to promote social justice, equity, and a sense of belonging for every child, ultimately enriching the educational experience for all learners.



Inclusive Education and Social Pedagogy

The frameworks of inclusive education and social pedagogy guide us in creating educational environments that prioritize the holistic development and equitable participation of all learners, including those with refugee backgrounds.

More specifically Inclusive education aims to dismantle barriers to learning by promoting equal access to educational opportunities and resources. It does not perceive students as a homogenous group, whether they are children with disabilities, refugees, or come from other diverse backgrounds. Instead, inclusive education emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing the individual differences among students. It seeks to create a flexible and adaptable learning environment, providing various forms of support and accommodations to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed.

This approach involves accommodating diverse learning needs and celebrating the richness of cultural and linguistic diversity among students. By fostering inclusive classrooms where every child feels valued and supported, environments conducive to academic success and social inclusion are established. Inclusive education not only enhances educational outcomes but also promotes empathy, respect, and cooperation among students, preparing them to thrive in a diverse and interconnected world.



Social pedagogy complements inclusive education by emphasizing the importance of nurturing relationships and holistic development. It encourages educators to adopt a relational approach, building supportive connections with students, families, and communities. Social pedagogy promotes not only academic learning but also the emotional and social growth of individuals, fostering resilience, autonomy, and a sense of belonging.

Integrating these frameworks in educational practices involves engaging in collaborative partnerships with families, communities, and stakeholders to create supportive networks that facilitate the inclusion of students with refugee backgrounds. It requires continuously assessing and adapting teaching strategies through reflective practice to meet the diverse needs of students, ensuring inclusive and responsive educational environments. Cultural sensitivity plays a crucial role by recognizing and respecting cultural differences and identities, thereby fostering an inclusive culture that values diversity. Equitable access is essential, necessitating the provision of necessary support services and accommodations to ensure all students, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to participate and succeed in educational settings.

By applying the principles of inclusive education and social pedagogy, educators can create environments where every student, regardless of their background, feels empowered to learn, grow, and contribute positively to their communities. These frameworks guide us in promoting social justice, equity, and inclusivity within educational settings, ultimately enriching the educational experience for all learners.

Enhancing Inclusivity for refugee children in Preschool Settings: Recommendations for Teachers

1. Daily Routines: Establishing Structure and Consistency

“All children must arrive at the kindergarten by 08:15. Parents wait outside the door until the teacher opens it. [...] The children choose which activity they would like to engage in until around 9:00. This includes drawing, building with blocks, creating a train, having discussions among themselves, and reading books. When the teacher is ready to start the meeting with the children, she claps her hands and tells them that in 5-10 minutes, they should start gathering their toys or whatever they are engaged in, because the meeting will start. Many of the children are already starting to gather their things and sit on the benches where the gathering will take place. [...] After the morning gathering, the children have their lunch break. Then they go outside to the small courtyard they have for about an hour. After they come back at around 12:00, the second teacher has arrived, and there is a second gathering.”

In another case the daily routine was described as follows: *“In that gathering there is one child who says good morning in which language he wants (languages spoken at home) and the other children also answer in the language they want.”*

The morning routine is described again in the following way: *“When the time for the morning meeting came, the teacher followed the procedure she told us they followed daily. We talked with the children about what day it is, which month we are in, what the date is, what the weather is, and after they went through their regular routine.”*

Refugee children often face challenges adjusting to new environments, routines, and expectations. Establishing daily specific routines offers predictability and stability, which are crucial for their sense of security and comfort. When children know what to expect throughout the day—such as regular times for activities, meals, rest, and transitions—they feel more confident and are better able to engage in learning activities.

Benefits of Daily Routines:

- **Sense of Predictability:** Predictable routines reduce anxiety and help children feel more secure. For refugee children who may have experienced instability, routines provide a reliable structure that supports their emotional well-being.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Consistent routines create a sense of safety and belonging, which supports emotional regulation. Refugee children, who may have experienced trauma or disruption, benefit from the stability provided by predictable daily routines.
- **Smooth Transitions:** Structured routines facilitate smooth transitions between activities, minimizing disruptions and allowing children to focus on learning and social interactions.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Incorporation of cultural elements into daily routines—such as acknowledging mealtime customs or incorporating greetings in different languages—demonstrates respect for diverse backgrounds and promotes inclusivity.



2. The role of Visual Aids

In another case it was quoted: “We noticed the classroom walls were decorated, among other things with different stations offering activities from which children can choose to play. A child would pick an activity and set their name on the said activity on the wall. And each time they change an activity, they would remember to change their name to correspond with the activity. This showed how orderly and routinely the children were.”

“We also noticed that every kindergarten and classroom featured visual aids, primarily designed for children with disabilities. We believe these visual aids could also greatly benefit non-native speakers, including refugee children, by facilitating comprehension, communication, and the expression of their needs.”

Visual aids such as schedules, picture charts, and labelled areas in the classroom are invaluable tools for supporting communication and understanding among children with diverse linguistic abilities, including refugee children. Visual schedules provide a structured outline of daily activities and transitions, offering clear expectations in a format that is accessible regardless of language proficiency. For refugee children navigating a new educational environment, these schedules offer predictability and help reduce anxiety by outlining what to expect throughout the day. These aids serve several essential purposes:

Benefits of Visual Aids:

- **Enhanced Communication:** Visual aids provide clear, concrete representations of daily routines and expectations, supporting comprehension for children who are learning a new language or have limited verbal skills.
- **Independence and Empowerment:** By referring to visual schedules and cues, children gain independence in navigating their daily activities. This empowers them to make choices, follow routines, and participate actively in classroom activities.
- **Inclusive Environment:** Visual supports ensure that all children, regardless of language proficiency or cultural background, have equitable access to information and opportunities within the classroom.





3. The Value of Free, Authentic Play

One description of free play engagement is the following: *“During our visits to the kindergartens in Norway, we observed a consistently implemented play-based approach. We observed numerous instances of children engaging in self-directed play, while kindergarten teachers emphasized to us its pivotal role in fostering learning, skill development, and personal growth. We noted, though, a scarcity of structured activities organized by kindergarten teachers in the daily schedule, with the exception of one kindergarten.”*

Free, authentic play is vital for preschool children with refugee backgrounds, helping them manage past trauma and adapt to new environments. It provides a natural outlet for stress and anxiety, allowing for emotional expression and aiding resilience. Play-based learning enhances cognitive skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and concentration, essential for academic success. It also builds trust between children and educators, fostering security and confidence. Through play, children experience inclusion, belonging, and cultural sharing, promoting mutual understanding and aiding adaptation. Furthermore, the trust fostered during play activities enhances their sense of security and confidence in new environments. Ultimately, play brings joy and emotional well-being, supporting holistic development and resilience amidst displacement , and enabling children to navigate their new communities.



Benefits of Free, Authentic Play:

- **Stress Reduction:** Free play provides a natural outlet for stress and anxiety, which are common among children with refugee backgrounds due to past trauma and current uncertainties.
- **Emotional Expression:** Through play, children can express complex emotions in a safe and manageable way, aiding in emotional regulation and resilience.
- **Supports Academic Readiness:** Engaging in play-based learning activities enhances cognitive skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and concentration, which are foundational for academic success. This preparation is essential as refugee children transition into more formal schooling systems.
- **Building Trust:** Engaging in play activities builds trust between children and educators, as well as among peers. Trust is particularly crucial for refugee children who may be adjusting to new cultural norms and environments. By participating in play experiences that are enjoyable and supportive, children develop confidence and a sense of security.
- **Emotional Expression:** Play serves as a vehicle for children to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in a non-threatening environment. Refugee children often carry emotional burdens from their past experiences, and through play, they can process these emotions, build resilience, and develop coping strategies.
- **Sense of Belonging:** Engaging in play with other children fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging, crucial for children who might feel isolated due to cultural and language differences.
- **Promotes Joy and Well-being:** Play inherently brings joy, laughter, and positive emotions to children's lives, providing moments of happiness and emotional well-being amidst the challenges of displacement and resettlement.



4. The importance of teacher-children ratio

“In every kindergarten we visited, we noticed a substantial number of educators and staff. We were informed that the ratio of children to teachers was 1:6. Additionally, there were more staff members in various roles, tailored to the needs of each setting.”

In the context of early childhood education, particularly for refugee children, the importance of a low teacher-pupil ratio cannot be overstated. Refugee children often face significant challenges, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, and the emotional aftermath of displacement. Ensuring a low ratio of teachers to pupils in kindergarten settings is crucial for providing these children with the individualized attention and support they need. This approach not only facilitates their academic and social development but also fosters a sense of stability, safety, and belonging in their new environment. By addressing the unique needs of refugee children through a supportive and personalized educational framework, it can help lay a strong foundation for their future success and integration into the community.

Benefits from low teacher-pupil ratio

- **Individualized Attention and Support:** A lower teacher-pupil ratio allows educators to provide more individualized attention and support to each child. For children with refugee backgrounds who may require additional language support, socio-emotional guidance, or academic assistance, a smaller group size facilitates personalized learning experiences tailored to their unique need.
- **Security and trust:** A lower ratio fosters closer relationships between educators and children, promoting a sense of security and trust. This is particularly beneficial for refugee children who may be adjusting to new cultural environments and social norms. Strong teacher-child relationships support emotional well-being, academic engagement, and social integration.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Support:** Educators can allocate more time and resources to understanding and addressing the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of individual children in smaller groups. This allows for meaningful communication, cultural responsiveness, and targeted language development support that meets the specific needs of refugee children.
- **Learning opportunities:** Smaller group sizes facilitate more interactive and participatory learning experiences. Educators can engage children in discussions, collaborative projects, and hands-on activities that encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and peer collaboration. For refugee children, active participation in small group settings promotes language acquisition, social skills development, and academic success.



- **Effective Classroom Management:** With a lower teacher-pupil ratio, educators can maintain a well-managed classroom environment where all children feel safe, valued, and respected (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). This creates a conducive atmosphere for learning, minimizes behavioral challenges, and enhances overall classroom dynamics.
- **Monitoring Progress and Growth:** Educators can closely monitor the progress and development of each child in smaller groups, identifying strengths, areas for growth, and potential challenges. This proactive approach allows for timely interventions, differentiated support, and collaborative partnerships with families to promote positive outcomes for refugee children.



5. The Teacher as Facilitator: Actively Listening to Students' Needs

"As we have observed the Norwegian kindergarten teachers in their preschool settings, we were struck by their role as facilitators of children's learning through a gentle and supportive approach. It was common practice in all 3 kindergarten educators emphasized in fostering independence and self-directed exploration among the children."

"Children were encouraged to explore and engage independently, while kindergarten teachers acted primarily as helpers or facilitators of their needs."

"As the end of the week approaches, we can see that the children are quite tired. They have encountered new faces, experienced emotional situations, and have been thinking a lot about us, the new people they see in their lives these days. During the gathering, the teacher understands that there was a lot of overstimulation, and immediately changed the programme by adding new activities which children enjoy (like singing, colouring"

Facilitative teaching is a powerful approach that not only enhances academic achievement but also promotes the holistic development and well-being of refugee learners. By addressing their unique educational needs, fostering inclusivity, and nurturing their social-emotional growth, facilitative teachers create a supportive environment where refugee children can thrive in new educational settings. In embracing democratic principles within the classroom, teachers empower students to actively participate in shaping their learning experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration among diverse learners.

Benefits when teachers act as facilitators

- **Encouraging Social Integration:** Facilitative teaching promotes collaborative learning activities that allow refugee learners to interact with peers, build friendships, and develop social skills. Group projects, discussions, and cooperative games provide opportunities for refugee learners to practice communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution in a supportive context, enhancing both academic learning and social integration in their new community.
- **Fostering Resilience and Empowerment:** Facilitative teachers empower refugee learners by encouraging independence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Offering choices and autonomy in learning experiences helps these learners regain a sense of control and agency after displacement, fostering resilience and self-confidence essential for academic and personal success.



- **Building Positive Relationships and Trust:** Facilitative teachers establish positive relationships with refugee learners through trust, empathy, and understanding. They create a safe and supportive learning environment that encourages open communication and provides emotional support to address past trauma or hardships. These relationships contribute to a nurturing educational experience where refugee learners feel valued, respected, and motivated to engage fully in their learning journey.
- **Promoting Democracy in the Classroom:** Facilitative teaching involves empowering children to have a voice in shaping their learning experiences. By actively listening to and incorporating children's interests, concerns, and cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, teachers promote democratic principles within the classroom. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among refugee learners, encouraging active participation and critical thinking skills essential for their academic and social development.



6. Structured Activities Promoting Team Building, Trust, and Empathy

“The teacher planned a blindfold game as an activity for the children while they played outside in the courtyard. In this game, each child had to stand next to another and become a pair. One child would close their eyes, and the other would hold them by the shoulders and guide them. The guide would take care of and protect their partner from falling or hitting anything.”

“The teachers had organized a number of team building activities as mentioned earlier, coloring on the same picture and “Zombie pillow game” where each child had a pillow to sit on and one extra. Here, they all had to partner up and prevent the “zombie” from taking the extra pillow while a zombie inspired track was playing in the background.”

“We observed a situation where a child with disabilities required space and quiet, and the others promptly adjusted, reminding each other to keep quiet so as not to disturb the child. It was remarkable to witness their sympathy and understanding towards the child when it was needed.”

“One day, the teachers organized a variation of the well-known game “Musical Chairs” with a twist. Instead of removing children from the game each time they couldn't find a chair, all children remained in the game and had to find space in the remaining chairs. In the end, all the children had to fit onto one chair with the help of their peers.”

Organised activities focusing on team building, trust, and empathy create a supportive and inclusive environment where all children, especially those with refugee backgrounds, can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. These activities foster positive relationships, emotional well-being, cultural understanding, and overall development, laying a foundation for success in preschool and beyond.

Benefits from cultivating Collaboration, Trust, and Empathy in the classroom

- **Building Connections:** Team-building activities provide opportunities for children to interact, collaborate, and form friendships. For refugee children, who may initially feel isolated or unfamiliar, these activities create a welcoming environment where they can connect with peers and develop a sense of belonging.
- **Inclusive Environment:** Activities focused on teamwork foster inclusivity by encouraging all children to participate and contribute. This inclusive atmosphere helps refugee children feel accepted and valued within the classroom community.
- **Emotional Support:** Trust-building activities create a safe space where children feel comfortable expressing their emotions and sharing their experiences. This emotional support is crucial for refugee children as they navigate the challenges of adjusting to a new environment.
- **Promoting Empathy:** Activities that encourage empathy help children understand and appreciate different perspectives and experiences, including those of their refugee peers. This promotes compassion and empathy among all children in the classroom.
- **Personal Development:** Participating in team-building activities promotes personal growth by boosting children's confidence, self-esteem, and resilience. For refugee children, who may face additional challenges, these activities provide opportunities to develop strengths and overcome obstacles.

- **Improved Learning Outcomes:** A sense of belonging and respect fosters a supportive learning environment where children are more likely to collaborate with peers, seek help from teachers, and persist through academic challenges. This supportive atmosphere enhances learning outcomes across subjects.
- **Cultural Exchange:** Team-building activities can incorporate cultural elements and encourage children to learn about each other's backgrounds. For refugee children, sharing their cultural heritage fosters pride in their identity and promotes cross-cultural understanding among their peers.

7. The Role of Staff Diversity

"The fact that children and parents are allowed to use their mother tongue at the kindergarten proves also pivotal. In one instance, we observed a mother speaking Swahili to a teacher when picking up her child. When asked about it, the teacher explained that the mother preferred to communicate in her mother tongue, which provided her with a sense of belonging and comfort. Despite the fact that the mother was fluent in Norwegian, her choice to use her native language strengthened her bond with the teacher and promoted a sense of belonging for both parties."

Staff diversity in preschool settings enriches educational experiences and enhances the inclusion of refugee children by promoting cultural competence, building trusting relationships with children and their families, creating inclusive environments, facilitating social integration, and advocating for inclusive practices. By leveraging their diverse backgrounds and insights, staff members empower refugee children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in preschool settings.

Benefits from Staff Diversity

- **Understanding Cultural Contexts:** Staff members with diverse cultural backgrounds bring nuanced understanding and sensitivity to the experiences of refugee children. They can recognize and respect cultural practices, traditions, and values that may differ from the dominant culture, ensuring that these are integrated into daily routines and activities.
- **Facilitating Communication:** Multilingual staff can bridge language barriers and facilitate effective communication between educators, children, and families. This supports meaningful interactions, enhances language development, and fosters a sense of belonging for refugee children who may be learning a new language.
- **Role Models and Mentors:** Staff members from similar backgrounds as refugee children can serve as positive role models and mentors, offering understanding and empathy. Their presence helps children feel validated, respected, and supported in navigating cultural adjustments and building confidence.

- **Family Engagement:** Culturally diverse staff can effectively engage with refugee families, establishing trust and facilitating partnerships . By understanding cultural norms and preferences, they can collaborate with families to support children’s learning, share information about educational practices, and address any concerns or challenges.
- **Advocating for Inclusion:** Culturally diverse staff can advocate for inclusive policies and practices within the preschool and broader community . They can raise awareness about the unique needs of refugee children, advocate for resources and support services, and collaborate with stakeholders to create inclusive learning environments.

8. Inclusive culture and community engagement

“We also observed that the neighborhoods where the kindergartens were situated were also child-friendly, with numerous playgrounds and community spaces. Schoolyards remained open after hours, inviting continuous play and interaction among children from the neighborhood. However, some kindergarten teachers stated that it is not a common practice for preschool children to meet and play together after school hours. The open kindergarten concept adds value as a structure, acting as a community hub and offering spaces where families, especially newcomers, could meet and engage with one another.”



Community engagement and fostering an inclusive culture are fundamental in ensuring the successful inclusion of refugee children in preschool settings. These initiatives play a pivotal role in creating environments where all children, regardless of background, feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. By actively involving local communities and promoting cultural understanding, preschools can provide essential social connections, academic support, and emotional well-being for refugee children navigating new educational landscapes. Community engagement and an inclusive culture not only enrich the educational experience but also lay the foundation for refugee children to integrate confidently into their preschool environments, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing overall development.

Benefits of Fostering an Inclusive Culture and Community Engagement

- **Social Inclusion:** Engaging with local communities helps refugee children build friendships and relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds. This interaction reduces isolation, promotes social skills, and creates a sense of belonging within the preschool environment .
- **Cultural Understanding:** Exposure to inclusive cultures fosters empathy and respect for diversity among all children. Refugee children can share their cultural heritage while learning about others', enriching the educational experience through mutual understanding and appreciation.
- **Academic Support:** Preschools that actively involve the community often provide additional academic resources and support services tailored to the needs of refugee children. These may include language assistance, tutoring programs, and access to educational materials that promote academic success.
- **Emotional Well-being:** Feeling valued and supported in an inclusive environment enhances the emotional resilience of refugee children. Community engagement provides opportunities for emotional support, counseling, and positive reinforcement, crucial for navigating the challenges of a new educational and cultural environment .
- **Overall Development:** By fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment, community engagement and inclusive cultures lay a solid foundation for the holistic development of refugee children. They build confidence, self-esteem, and resilience, preparing children to succeed not only academically but also socially and emotionally in preschool and beyond.



9. The Role of Learning Environment and Materials

“The learning environments were rich with materials designed to encourage children to engage in hands-on experiences and interactions with each other. Every aspect of the space design was intended to cultivate an environment that nurtures holistic development, integrating cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative growth.”

“A variety of materials in the kindergartens reflect the staff’s commitment to promoting equity and inclusion. These include identity texts, multilingual books, and silent books. Greetings in various languages and celebrations like birthdays underscored the diverse backgrounds of the children. However, the display of national flags and celebration of national holidays raises concerns about potentially reinforcing intergroup biases and privileging certain cultures and histories.”

“We were deeply intrigued by the use of silent books in cultivating inclusive atmospheres and fostering relationships in multicultural environments. The silent book library of FABEL creative language center and the relevant project in Lampedusa which we explored during a workshop enlightened us about the potential of silent books to unite people, transcending language barriers and verbal communication. Serving as visual narratives, silent books offer readers/viewers the freedom to interpret the story in their own way, providing teachers with versatile tools for creative activities and opportunities to engage children collaboratively in exploring the book’s possible meanings.”

In preschool settings, cultivating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment is crucial for the overall growth and happiness of every child, particularly those from refugee backgrounds. These enriched environments are pivotal in supporting refugee children by providing a variety of engaging materials, fostering equity and inclusiveness, promoting cultural understanding, and bolstering language development. Beyond academic support, these initiatives facilitate the seamless social and emotional integration of refugee children into the classroom community, ensuring they feel valued and supported in their educational journey.

Benefits from enriched learning environment:

- **Holistic Development:** The diverse array of materials and interactive spaces in the kindergarten promotes holistic development, encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative growth. Through hands-on experiences and interactive learning opportunities, refugee children can enhance their overall development and prepare for academic challenges.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** The presence of identity texts, multilingual books, and silent books reflects a commitment to equity and inclusion. These resources validate diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing refugee children to see themselves represented positively in the classroom. This validation fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging, crucial for their emotional well-being and integration into the classroom community.
- **Language Development:** Exposure to multilingual books, silent books and identity texts supports language development in both the children's native language and the language of instruction. These resources provide opportunities for language acquisition, literacy development, and effective communication skills, aiding refugee children in their academic and social integration.

10. The Role of Indoor and Outdoor Space Environments

“In Oslo, all the kindergartens we visited were housed in large buildings with extensive outdoor spaces, often located near natural settings such as small forests. These environments were frequently utilized by the teachers. The proximity to nature provided ample opportunities for outdoor play, fostering a sense of exploration and connection to the natural environment... In the yard, where numerous toys like bicycles and skates were available, children did not experience long waits to play with them.”

“The kindergarten in Athens shares the building with a primary school, and it is a separate entity, meaning they have no relations with the primary school. One of the classrooms had their designated outdoor space which was quite small while the other classroom shared an outdoor space with the primary school. This resulted in the children of this classroom being outside for a limited time because they only used the outdoors while the primary school pupils had classes.”

In preschool settings, the design and utilization of indoor and outdoor spaces play a significant role in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Thoughtfully curated spaces are essential in providing a sense of safety, encouraging exploration, and facilitating meaningful interactions. By creating welcoming and adaptable environments, preschools can support the diverse needs of refugee children, promoting their integration and overall well-being. By carefully designing and utilizing indoor and outdoor spaces, preschools can create inclusive environments that support the needs of refugee children. These spaces not only enhance their learning experiences but also contribute to their overall sense of safety, belonging, and well-being.



Benefits of Ample and Well-Designed Spaces in Preschool Settings

- **Encouraging Exploration and Curiosity:** Well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces stimulate children's natural curiosity and encourage exploration. By offering a variety of play areas, sensory materials, and nature-based activities, these environments cater to different interests and learning styles. Refugee children can benefit from the opportunity to explore at their own pace, which can help them develop confidence and autonomy.
- **Promoting Social Interaction:** Indoor and outdoor environments should facilitate social interaction and collaboration among children. Spaces that encourage group activities, cooperative play, and shared projects can help refugee children build friendships and social skills. Outdoor play areas, in particular, provide a less structured setting where children can engage in spontaneous play and form bonds with their peers.
- **Cultural Inclusivity:** Inclusive environments should reflect the cultural diversity of the children they serve. Incorporating culturally relevant decorations, artifacts, and play materials in both indoor and outdoor spaces helps create a sense of belonging for refugee children. These elements can spark conversations and sharing about different cultures, promoting mutual respect and understanding among all students.
- **Physical and Emotional Well-being:** Outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for physical activity, which is crucial for children's physical health and emotional well-being. Activities such as running, climbing, and playing in nature help release energy and reduce stress. Indoor environments, with designated quiet areas and cozy corners, provide spaces where children can relax and recharge, essential for their emotional regulation and mental health.
- **Holistic Learning Experiences:** Indoor and outdoor environments should provide a range of learning experiences that support holistic development. Outdoor spaces can be used for nature exploration, gardening, and environmental education, while indoor spaces can offer art, music, and science activities. These diverse experiences help refugee children develop a broad range of skills and interests, preparing them for future academic success and personal growth.



11. Enriching Educational Settings through the Inclusion of Refugee Children

Integrating refugee children into educational settings is not only beneficial for the refugee children but also offers substantial advantages for local children. When local and refugee children learn together, it fosters an environment of mutual respect, understanding, and cultural exchange. This inclusive approach emphasizes that refugee children are a valuable resource rather than a problem.

Benefits of Integrating Refugee Children

- **Enhanced Cultural Awareness:** Exposure to different cultures and backgrounds helps local children develop a broader perspective of the world. This cultural exchange fosters open-mindedness and reduces prejudices, promoting a more inclusive society.
- **Empathy and Compassion:** Sharing the classroom with refugee children encourages local children to develop empathy and compassion. Understanding the challenges faced by their peers cultivates a sense of solidarity and support, which are essential values in a diverse community.
- **Language and Communication Skills:** Interacting with peers from different linguistic backgrounds enhances the language and communication skills of local children. It provides opportunities for learning new languages and appreciating the nuances of different modes of communication.
- **Social Skills and Teamwork:** Working together on various activities helps children develop crucial social skills and teamwork. It teaches them to collaborate effectively, respect differences, and build strong, supportive relationships.
- **Innovative Problem-Solving:** The diverse perspectives brought by refugee children can lead to innovative problem-solving approaches. Different viewpoints can inspire creativity and new ways of thinking, benefiting the entire classroom.
- **Resilience and Adaptability:** Engaging with refugee children, who often have had to adapt to significant changes and challenges, can teach local children valuable lessons in resilience and adaptability. This can help all children better navigate their own challenges and develop a stronger, more flexible approach to problem-solving and change.

By embracing inclusive education, we create a nurturing and enriching environment where all children, regardless of their background, can thrive. Refugee children, far from being a burden, enhance the educational experience and contribute positively to the development of their peers. This approach lays the foundation for a more cohesive and compassionate society, where diversity is celebrated, and everyone is given the opportunity to succeed.

Conclusion

The inclusion of refugee children into educational settings like schools and kindergartens requires a multifaceted and comprehensive approach. Both the recommendations from kindergarten teachers and the insights from the SPIRAL project highlight critical elements that contribute to the creation of inclusive and supportive environments.

First, staff diversity enriches the educational experience by bridging language barriers and fostering cultural competence. This diversity helps refugee children feel represented and understood, which is crucial for building trusting relationships within the educational environment. Active community engagement further supports this process, promoting social integration and cultural understanding. These efforts are essential for the emotional well-being and overall development of refugee children.

Additionally, enriching learning environments with diverse and inclusive materials is vital for supporting communication and language development, ensuring equity and inclusiveness. Refugee children benefit from materials such as multilingual books, silent books, and visual aids, which help them feel included in the classroom community. Structured activities that focus on building trust, empathy, and teamwork significantly enhance emotional well-being and personal development. These activities contribute to a supportive atmosphere where refugee children can develop positive relationships and a sense of belonging.



Professional development and knowledge exchange are also critical. The SPIRAL project highlighted the importance of cross-cultural exchange and professional development workshops, which equipped teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively. These initiatives are essential for addressing the specific needs of refugee children and fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Moreover, maintaining an appropriate teacher-child ratio is crucial for providing individualized attention and support. A low teacher-pupil ratio ensures that the unique needs of refugee children are met, fostering their academic and social growth while creating a stable and safe learning environment.

Ample and well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces further enhance these efforts by providing safe, engaging, and adaptable environments. These spaces support the varied needs of refugee children, contributing to their overall sense of security, belonging, and well-being.

Furthermore, the inclusion of refugee children in regular classes benefits local children by promoting empathy, cultural awareness, and social cohesion. Local children gain a broader worldview and develop essential social skills through interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds. This inclusive environment fosters mutual respect and understanding, preparing all children to thrive in a multicultural society and enhancing the overall learning experience for every student involved.

In summary, the successful inclusion of refugee children in preschool settings relies on an inclusive approach that encompasses diverse staff, active community engagement, enriched learning environments, structured activities, ongoing professional development, and appropriate teacher-child ratios. These elements collectively create a nurturing and inclusive environment that promotes the holistic development of refugee children, enabling them to thrive and confidently integrate into their new educational settings. The practices and insights from both the SPIRAL project and kindergarten teachers provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers aiming to foster inclusive education in diverse cultural contexts.

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