

## REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Safety, Belonging and Success in Education for Refugees in Europe: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic review aims to explore refugees' educational access, experiences and outcomes in Europe since 2015. The review follows a systematic process of reviewing and synthesising texts compiled in the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE) Knowledge Base to fill gaps in knowledge about the educational trajectories of learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds who have arrived in Europe. The review includes studies that focus on all forms of educational provision and services for refugees and forced migrants in Europe: formal, non-formal and informal. The review also takes a meta-ethnographic approach to data analysis and synthesis. Key findings highlight the interconnectedness of safety, belonging and success in education for learners with refugee and forced migrant backgrounds and the necessity of economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political participation for achieving these goals.

## 1 | Introduction

As the world grapples with escalating global conflicts and crises, high-income resettlement regions, particularly those in Europe, bear a moral responsibility to provide high-quality, inclusive education for children of refugee backgrounds. This duty arises from the staggering scale of displacement, with over 100 million refugees worldwide—a significant proportion of whom are children (UNHCR 2024). The issue of refugees' educational access, experiences and outcomes has gained increasing attention from policymakers, researchers and the public in Europe in recent years (Dovigo 2018; European Commission 2020; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; Proyer, Krause, and Kremsner 2024; Refugee Education UK 2023; SIRIUS 2018; Veck, Dovigo, and Proyer 2021). While media depictions of the situation in Europe have focused on the 'refugee crisis' from the point of view of the countries that have become destinations, the individual human

experiences of this crisis from the perspective of refugees are less well documented and shared.

Several reviews have highlighted the complex challenges faced globally by learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds (Aghajafari et al. 2020; Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022; Arar 2021; Arar and Özücü 2022; Graham, Minhas, and Paxton 2016; McIntyre, Dixon, and Walton 2023; Ramsay and Baker 2019; Sullivan and Simonson 2016). Specifically in Europe, existing reviews identified key issues including difficulties in qualification recognition, stringent entry requirements, lack of accessible information, financial barriers, language difficulties, gender-specific barriers and social isolation (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019). What such reviews have shown is that, despite policy initiatives aimed at inclusion, there's a significant disconnect between aspirations and on-ground realities,

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necessitating new research that integrates the unique needs and experiences of learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. While existing reviews touch on these themes separately, there's a lack of comprehensive analysis examining how such experiences inform the educational trajectories of learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds.

This study aims to address this need by exploring the interplay between safety, belonging and success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in Europe, providing insight into their significance in the personal, economic, cultural and political dimensions of refugee and forced migrant education in Europe. The first objective of the review was to investigate what is known of education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants through early childhood, formal schooling, non-formal education, informal education and steps towards lifelong learning through continued adult education and training. The secondary objective of the review was to link what is known to what can be done in terms of enabling the mobilisation of knowledge about refugees' and forced migrants' educational trajectories towards ensuring their right to an inclusive and equitable quality education in Europe (UNESCO 1960; UNGA 1951, 1967, 1989). The second objective was to explore the themes of safety, belonging and success in refugee and forced migrant education in Europe. In fulfilling these objectives, this systematic review strives to bridge the information gap and facilitate informed decision-making for stakeholders, policymakers and educators in the realm of refugee education across Europe—thus fostering a more inclusive and just society for all.

This review drew on data taken from relevant resources in the *Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe* (HERE) project's Knowledge Base. The HERE project was established as a base for knowledge sharing about refugees' and other forced migrants' post-migration experiences in Europe, focusing on their right to an inclusive and equitable quality education in their resettlement context (UNESCO 1960; UNGA 1951, 1967, 1989). The HERE Knowledge Base is an ongoing and systematic data-searching and curatorial effort for the sharing and mobilisation of knowledge on education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants who have arrived in Europe with its own project website ([www.hubhere.org](http://www.hubhere.org)). Thus, the knowledge base collates research, advisory and advocacy activity across Europe and brings together academic and stakeholder expertise on policies and practices for including people with refugee backgrounds through education.

## 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 | Existing Research on Refugee Education in Europe

Existing research on refugee and forced migrant education in Europe collectively highlights a complex landscape of challenges and interventions, revealing persistent barriers to access and success in education for refugee and forced migrant populations (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019). The existing literature collectively identified several key challenges faced by learners of refugee and forced migrant background, including difficulties

in having prior qualifications recognised, stringent entry requirements, lack of accessible information about educational opportunities, financial barriers, language difficulties and social isolation (Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023). Gender-specific challenges were also prominent, with refugee and forced migrant women and girls often facing additional barriers due to cultural norms and intersecting forms of discrimination, and refugee and forced migrant men and boys subject to negative biases from educators, who may perceive them as more aggressive and in need of discipline (Hunt et al. 2023).

The existing literature further illustrated that these challenges were not isolated but interconnected, creating a multifaceted system of barriers for learners of refugee and forced migrant background seeking education in Europe (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019). For instance, language barriers not only hindered academic progress but also impeded social integration and access to vital information about educational pathways. Also, financial constraints extended beyond tuition fees to encompass living expenses and opportunity costs, particularly for those supporting families. Lastly, the recognition of prior qualifications also remains a significant hurdle, with many learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds struggling to have their educational and professional experiences valued in their host countries, leading to deskilling and underemployment (Streitwieser et al. 2019).

Despite numerous policy initiatives and localised interventions aimed at promoting inclusion, the existing literature reveals a striking disconnect between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019). There is a lack of systematic, shared practices across European universities for facilitating the enrolment and inclusion of refugee and forced migrant students, with many support mechanisms relying heavily on solutions designed for international or disadvantaged students more broadly, rather than addressing the unique needs of learners of refugee and forced migrant background (Hunt et al. 2023; Pastore et al. 2023). This misalignment between policy and practice underscores the need for more concrete, actionable strategies to translate well-intentioned policies into effective, embedded processes within educational institutions.

While the concepts, *safety*, *belonging* and *success*, occur in this literature, McIntyre and colleagues argue that it is the interplay between these interrelated concepts that shape an operational framework for considering how quality inclusive education for learners from refugee backgrounds can be mobilised most effectively (McIntyre, Neuhaus, and Blennow 2020; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021). Thus, while prior systematic reviews touch upon elements of these themes separately (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022; Pastore et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019), there is a lack of comprehensive analysis that explicitly examines how feelings of safety and belonging contribute to educational success, and conversely, how educational experiences shape refugees and forced migrants' sense of safety, belonging and success in Europe.

This gap is particularly notable given that current research emphasised the role of social isolation and unwelcoming

environments as barriers to education (Hunt et al. 2023; Kalocsányiová et al. 2022). This study addresses this gap in knowledge by focusing specifically on safety, belonging and success in education for learners of refugee and forced migrant background in Europe, thereby providing valuable insights into the personal, economic, cultural and political dimensions of refugee and forced migrant education that are not fully captured in existing research on refugee and forced migrant education in Europe. By focusing on these interconnected themes, this study not only fills a crucial gap in the literature but also provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners in Europe seeking to create more inclusive, supportive and effective educational environments for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds.

## 2.2 | Conceptualising Refugee Education

Our conceptualisation of refugee education finds its foundation in the rights of children from refugee backgrounds, as enshrined in international agreements such as the UN Refugee Convention (1951), the UN Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the UN Refugee Protocol (1967) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Ensuring access to education is not just a matter of practicality but a fundamental imperative for promoting the inclusion of children from refugee backgrounds and facilitating their return to ordinary lives following the upheaval they have endured. As a result, for this systematic review, we endorse McIntyre and colleagues' (McIntyre, Neuhaus, and Blennow 2020; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021) conceptualisation of refugee education as being a multifaceted social justice issue requiring a strengths-based, holistic approach focused on safety, belonging and success, and which advocates for creating high-quality inclusive environments which enable children from refugee backgrounds to resume ordinary lives and participate on a par with their peers. This conceptualisation of refugee education is predicated on a commitment to inclusive education underpinned by a strong motivation for social justice.

In this systematic review, we follow McIntyre and colleagues' (McIntyre, Neuhaus, and Blennow 2020; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021) work, which conflates concepts devised by Ravi Kohli with Fraser's theory of participatory parity. Thus, we draw upon Ravi Kohli's theory of 'resumption of an ordinary life' (Kohli 2011; Kohli 2014) as an operational frame, while Nancy Fraser's theory of 'participatory parity' (Fraser 2003) provides a lens through which to explore moral norms for operationalising Kohli's concepts when working with children from refugee backgrounds. The theory of 'resumption of an ordinary life' posits that children from refugee backgrounds seek to transition through *safety*, *belonging* and *success* in their pursuit of ordinary lives in resettlement. The theory of 'participatory parity' argues that social justice requires enabling *redistribution*, *recognition* and *participation* to dismantle barriers that prevent some groups from participating fully in social life. Such an approach serves not only the immediate and long-term educational needs of children from refugee backgrounds but also contributes significantly to the broader project of including diverse populations in local communities, forging

bonds of understanding and advancing the cause of social justice on a global scale.

## 2.3 | Refugee Education Policy and Practice in Europe

This systematic review acknowledges that refugee education is multidimensional, occurring in various systems and educational settings. The study also recognises that non-formal learning and informal learning are also important educational contexts that often compensate for gaps in formal provision in settings such as schools, colleges and universities. As such, the study understands refugee education in Europe as including formal education, non-formal education and informal education (Werquin 2010).

*Formal* education occurs in structured environments such as schools, colleges, universities and vocational training centres, adhering to a defined curriculum and learning objectives facilitated by trained teachers and instructors. It also uses standardised methods of assessment and grants certificates or diplomas upon successful completion of a programme.

*Non-formal education* refers to intentional yet more flexible learning activities that occur outside of traditional academic institutions. Examples of non-formal education include programmes offered through community centres, youth organisations, sports clubs, cultural associations and some vocational training centres. It addresses the specific needs and interests of students without necessarily following a prescribed curriculum with predetermined goals. Common non-formal learning activities include language courses, computer training, creative arts programmes, sports coaching and leadership development workshops.

Finally, *informal* education is learning acquired spontaneously through daily life experiences and interactions, without any imposed structure or external learning targets. Informal education can transpire through activities at home, in the workplace, during leisure time and through social relationships. Reading books, watching documentaries, learning from elders, job shadowing, listening to podcasts and participating in online forums are examples of informal learning. Although often unrecognised due to lack of formal credentials, informal education plays a significant role in building knowledge, skills, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities and promoting personal and professional growth.

## 3 | Methods

Our systematic review was conducted according to the methodology outlined by Aromataris and Munn (Aromataris and Munn 2020) and guidelines set by PRISMA (Page, McKenzie, et al. 2021; Page, Moher, et al. 2021). Systematic reviews are comprehensive research studies that rigorously collect, assess and synthesise existing evidence on a specific topic or research question. They are valuable for identifying research gaps as they systematically examine all relevant studies, highlighting areas where further investigation is needed. Additionally, systematic

reviews inform future research directions, policymaking and decision-making processes by providing a robust summary of existing knowledge, helping stakeholders to make informed choices and allocate resources effectively. This review drew on data taken from relevant resources in the HERE project's knowledge base, as introduced above. The systematic review methodology for the study involved database searches; screening of titles, abstracts and author keywords; data extraction and meta-ethnographic synthesis. Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA flow diagram for this systematic review. For the full protocol, see Aleghfeli et al. (2023).

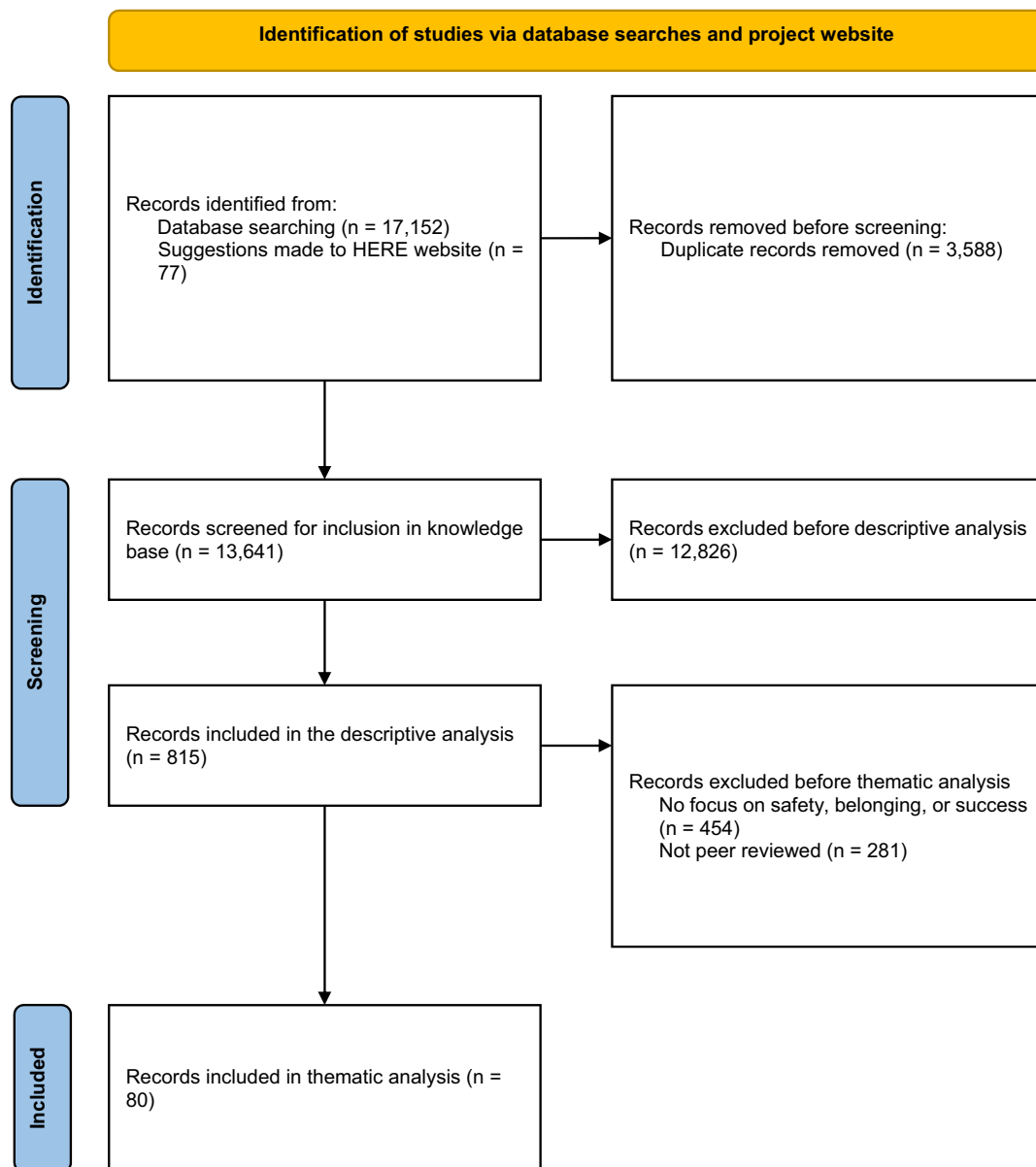
### 3.1 | Information Sources

The following electronic bibliographic databases and websites were searched to identify journal articles, books, book chapters, conference papers, master-level dissertations, doctorate-level dissertations and policy reports published since 2015:

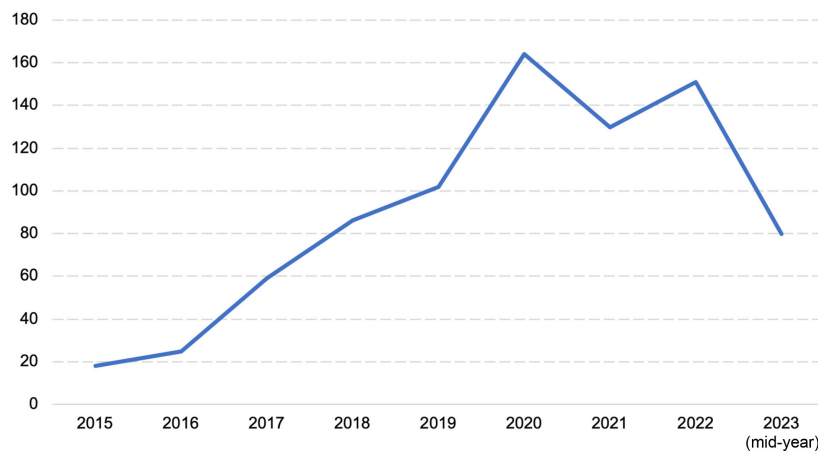
EBSCOhost, Elsevier SCOPUS, ProQuest and Web of Science. Figure 2 displays the flow diagram for the study selection process, which follows the PRISMA guidelines (Page, McKenzie, et al. 2021; Page, Moher, et al. 2021). The selection of these databases was made after consultation with a steering group of senior academics and NGOs working on refugee education in Europe.

### 3.2 | Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) were journal articles, books, book chapters, conference papers, master-level dissertations, doctorate-level dissertations or policy reports; (b) focused on educational settings (formal, informal and non-formal); (c) were written in English or any other language, provided that an adequate translation was provided; (d) were set in at least one European country, as defined by the European Union (2023); (e) referred to the educational trajectories of refugee and forced



**FIGURE 1** | PRISMA flow diagram for the systematic review.



**FIGURE 2** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by year (January 2015–June 2023).

migrant arrivals to Europe since 2011; and (f) were published from the year 2015 and onwards, so as to contextualise the review around more recent patterns of migration into Europe (UNHCR 2024). For non-English studies obtained through the systematic search, only studies which had an English abstract are included.

### 3.3 | Search Strategy

After an initial piloting stage in which several search term combinations are trialled, the following terms and Boolean operator combinations were selected and used to search databases for relevant resources: ('Refugee\*' OR 'Asylum-seek\*' OR 'Asylum seek\*' OR 'Forced migrant\*' OR 'Displaced person\*' OR 'Displaced people\*' OR 'Unaccompanied' OR 'Stateless\*' OR 'Undocumented\*') AND ('Educat\*' OR 'Learn\*' OR 'Teach\*' OR 'School\*' OR 'Student\*' OR 'Pupil\*' OR 'Classroom\*' OR 'Universit\*' OR 'College\*') AND ('[COUNTRY]' OR '[DEMONYM]'). The same search term combination was used across all databases for consistency. Results lists were then filtered to include only those resources that met the inclusion criteria. Moreover, to ensure literature saturation, members of the project's network and visitors to the knowledge base's website were invited to suggest resources which, provided they met the inclusion criteria, were included in the knowledge base.

### 3.4 | Data Extraction

Data extraction was conducted using a standardised form based on the PRISMA checklist (Page, McKenzie, et al. 2021; Page, Moher, et al. 2021). This form covered information on the study design, characteristics of the study population, types of educational services or interventions referenced in the study and a summary of the key findings. Two internal reviewers identified this specific data in the included studies and copied it into the standardised forms. The data extraction form was used to extract the following data items: (1) Study information (Title, Author(s), Study type, Study URL, Country, Aim, Methods, Access Type); (2) Participant information

(Sample data/Source, Age, Nationality, Legal status, Context, Recruitment); (3) Types of educational services (Education level, Education type) and (4) Study Summary (Findings, Limitations).

### 3.5 | Study Selection

Studies identified through the search strategy were downloaded as RIS files and then uploaded to Zotero, a free and open-source reference management software for a first round of deduplication and then onto Rayyan, a free and open-source systematic review management software (Ouzzani et al. 2016), for a second round of deduplication. Studies identified through the deduplication process underwent a screening of their title, abstract and author keywords on Rayyan. The initial search for the Knowledge Base returned 17,229 publications. These were deduplicated in Zotero and Rayyan, which reduced the number to 13,641 studies. After title, abstract and author keyword screening, 815 studies were identified between January 2015 and June 2023 and included in the knowledge base.

### 3.6 | Descriptive Analysis

In total, 815 studies were identified for descriptive analysis. The final 815 studies were then downloaded from Rayyan and collated into one Excel worksheet. Each eligible study in the final Excel worksheet was then systematically tagged based on a data codebook that labelled each study with the following code categories:

- Theme: code indicating the thematic focus of the eligible study as it relates to refugee education research.
- Education level: code indicating the level of education at which the eligible study is conducted.
- Method: code indicating methodological and analytical approach pursued by the eligible study.
- Publication format: code indicating the publication format in which the eligible study is published.



- Education type: code indicating which educational subject the eligible study is focusing on.
- County: code indicating the country, or countries, where the eligible study was set.
- Year of publication: code indicating in which year the eligible study was published.
- Publication access: code indicating whether the eligible study is open access or not.

After the systematic tagging of studies with the relevant codes and code categories, distributions of the codes were then examined then visualised to illustrate current trends and gaps in the research on education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants who have arrived in Europe since 2015.

### 3.7 | Thematic Analysis

From the 815 studies in the Knowledge Base, 80 peer-reviewed studies were identified as having a thematic focus on *safety*, *belonging* and *success*, warranting their inclusion in the thematic analysis. This review pursued meta-ethnographic synthesis to thematically analyse those studies, which is characterised by line-of-argument synthesis and third-order interpretation (Noblit and Hare 1988; Nye, Melendez-Torres, and Bonell 2016). First, the data went through a line-of-argument synthesis, with the purpose of making an inference of challenges and supports defining experiences in refugee education. Second, third-order interpretations were inferred from the extracted data: being themes based on the researchers' interpretation of the reported analysis in each of the studies (i.e., second-order interpretation) of the experiences of refugees (i.e., first-order interpretation).

The thematic analysis draws upon McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021) and their bringing together of Ravi Kohli's theory of 'resumption of an ordinary life' and Nancy Fraser's theory of 'participatory parity' (813). They utilise Kohli as an operational frame, which posits that children from refugee backgrounds seek to transition through *safety*, *belonging* and *success* in their pursuit of ordinary lives in resettlement. In this bringing together, they assert that Fraser's argument that social justice requires enabling *redistribution*, *recognition* and *participation* to dismantle barriers that prevent some groups from participating fully in social life can be used as a lens through which to thematically explore moral norms for operationalising Kohli's concepts when working with children from refugee backgrounds.

### 3.8 | Reliability Checks

Intercoder reliability checks were conducted as part of the development of the knowledge base. Of the total number of articles, 10% were randomly selected and given to three of the HERE team members to determine whether a study should be included in the knowledge base or excluded. From this check, all three coders collectively agreed 90% of the time, which represented high intercoder agreement (Miles and Huberman 1994).

## 4 | Descriptive Results

In total, through a systematic search strategy conducted on work published between January 2015 and June 2023, 815 studies were identified that focused on education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants in Europe, thereby warranting their inclusion in the descriptive analysis.

### 4.1 | Education for Refugees in Europe by Year and Country

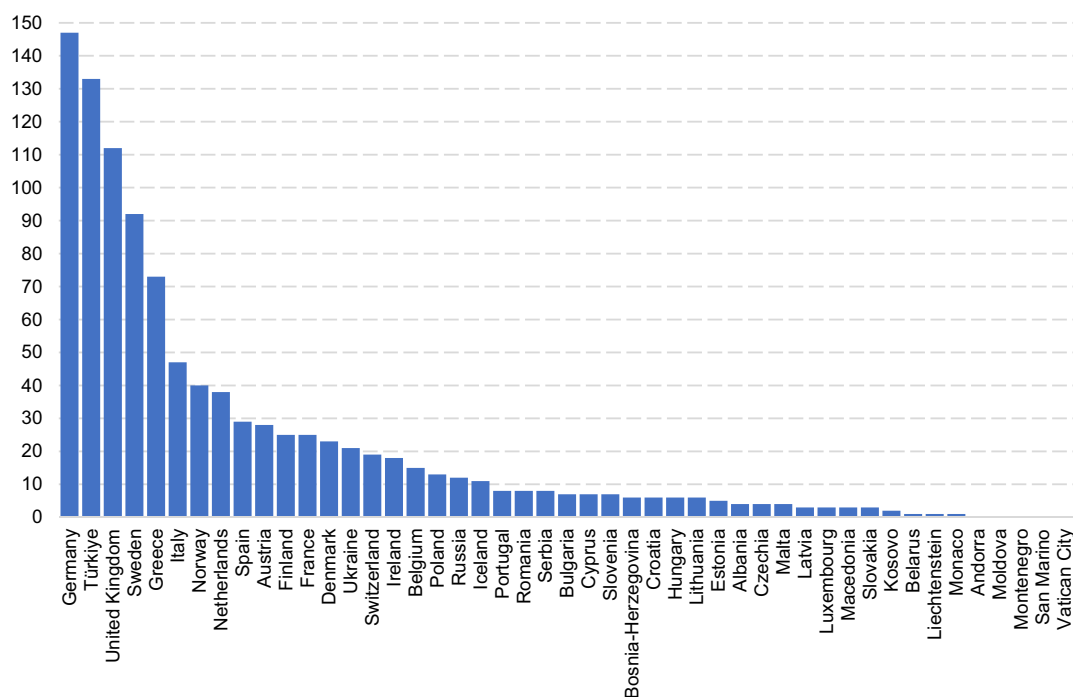
Figure 2 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by year. The number of publications on refugee education in Europe has been on the rise since 2015, reaching a peak in 2020 (164). Afterwards, however, the rate of publications briefly fell in 2021 (130) possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic impacting research in Europe. Since the pandemic, the rate of publications has remained below 2020, which could be due to the long-lasting effects of the pandemic on research production (Gao et al. 2021).

Figure 3 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by country. The top five countries where most of the studies took place on refugee education in Europe are Germany (147), Türkiye (133), the United Kingdom (112), Sweden (92) and Greece (73). The figure also revealed that 29 countries in Europe were the focus of study of fewer than 10 publications on refugee education since 2015, justifying a call for further research on refugee education in those countries. We acknowledge that the knowledge base comprises outputs published in English, which contributes to the fact that some countries are under-represented.

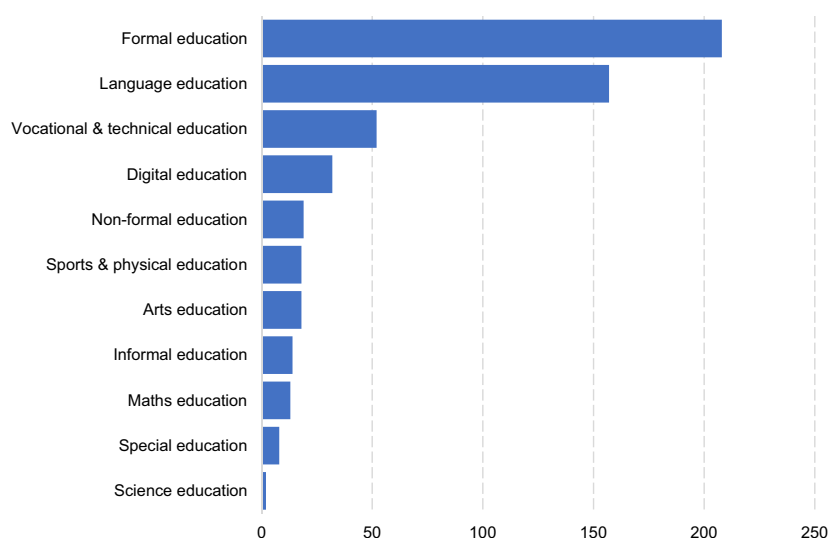
### 4.2 | Education for Refugees in Europe by Education Type and Level

Figure 4 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by education type. Among the identified publications in the knowledge base, only four areas were focused on by more than 20 studies. The education types that were most investigated were formal education (208), literacy and language education (157), vocational and technical education (52) and digital education (32). Studies focusing on digital education notably increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. The rest were all below 20 studies. Interestingly, non-formal education (19) and informal education (14) were under-investigated in comparison to formal education, despite non-formal and informal learning opportunities playing an important role in educational provisioning for newly arrived refugees or refugees who were unable to enrol in formal educational programming (Aleghfeli and Nag 2024; Hunt 2021; Vakali 2020). Moreover, numeracy and mathematics education (19) and science education (14) were under-investigated in comparison to literacy and language education.

Figure 5 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by education level. Among the identified publications in the knowledge base, tertiary education level (184) was by far the most studied, followed by secondary education (79) and adult education and training (67). This makes



**FIGURE 3** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by country (January 2015–June 2023).



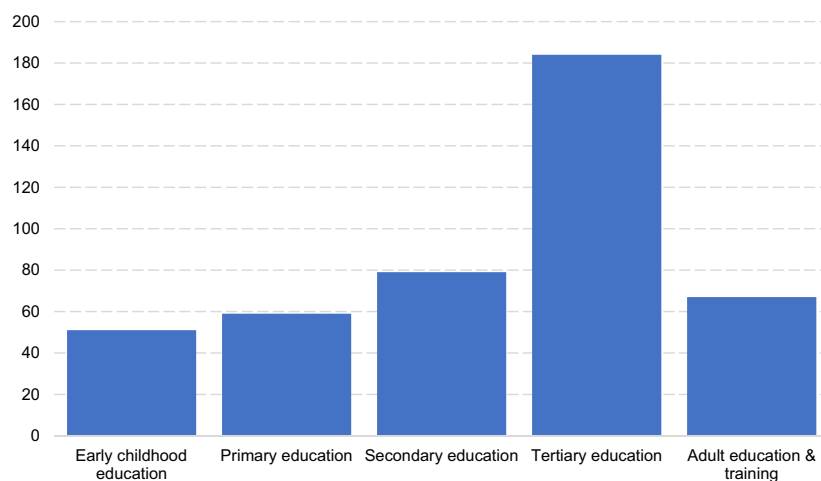
**FIGURE 4** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by education type (January 2015–June 2023).

primary-level education (59) and early childhood education (51) as the least studied education levels. In 2022, the number of refugee and forced migrant children in Europe who are below the age of 12 has crossed 3 million for the first time (UNHCR 2024). As such, there will be a need for more research on early childhood education and primary education services that are sensitive to the needs and circumstances of refugee and forced migrant children.

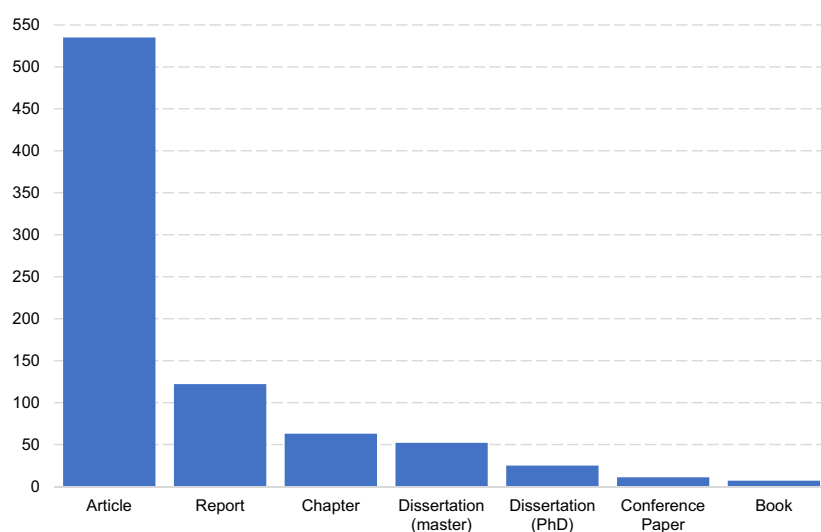
### 4.3 | Education for Refugees in Europe by Publication Type and Methods

Figure 6 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by publication type. As

explained in the inclusion criteria, studies eligible for the knowledge base had to be journal articles, books, book chapters, conference papers, master-level dissertations, doctorate-level dissertations or policy reports. In terms of publication type, the most common are journal articles (535). Reports are the second most common (122) revealing how refugee education is a strong priority for educational policy and practice in Europe. This is followed by book chapters (63), masters-level dissertation (52), doctoral-level dissertation (25), conference proceedings (11) and books (7). Interestingly, the large number of masters-level and doctoral-level dissertations indicates a significant body of peer-reviewed research by early career researchers worthy of examination for insight on refugee education in Europe.



**FIGURE 5** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by education level (January 2015–June 2023).



**FIGURE 6** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by publication type (January 2015–June 2023).

Figure 7 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by method. Among the identified publications in the knowledge base, nearly a third used interview techniques as a methodological approach (255).

#### 4.4 | Education for Refugees in Europe by Journal and Open Access

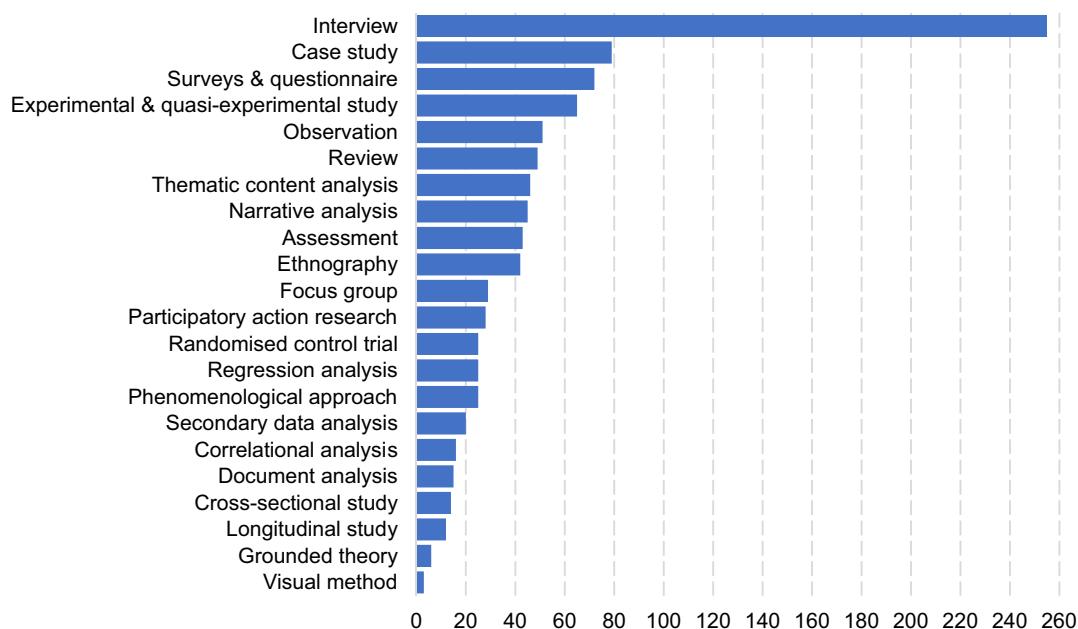
Figure 8 shows journals with five or more identified publications on refugee education. The rise of publications on refugee education in Europe has also been reflected in the number of journals detected. Our sample covers a total of 330 journals. However, one noticeable finding is that only 12 journals published five or more articles on refugee education in Europe. Of those, only two journals published ten or more articles. In comparison, 228 journals contain only one article. The five journals containing the most articles on refugee education in Europe are *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (16), *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (10), *Intercultural Education* (9), *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (9) and *Social Sciences* (9).

Figure 9 shows the number of identified publications on refugee education in Europe published by access. Of the 815 publications obtained through the systematic search, 64% are open access, meaning that they can be freely accessed by anyone without the need for a subscription, payment or other access restrictions. The large number of open access publications can be beneficial for refugee education researchers, students and the public who want to access and use this information without barriers. This is most probably due to growing institutional mandates that require research to be open access (Huang et al. 2020). This promotes the dissemination of knowledge and information to a wider audience.

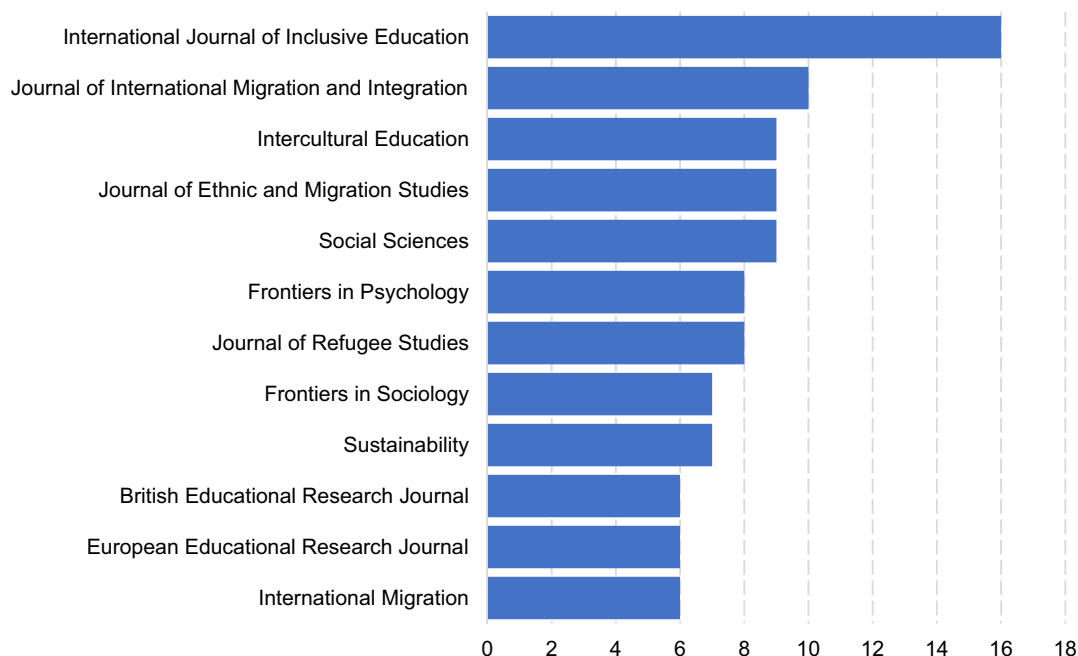
## 5 | Thematic Results

As mentioned earlier, the review theoretically drew upon McIntyre and Neuhaus' (2021) and their bringing together of Ravi Kohli's theory of 'resumption of an ordinary life' and Nancy Fraser's theory of 'participatory parity' (813). From the 815 studies in the HERE Knowledge Base of work published between January 2015 and June 2023 that focused on education





**FIGURE 7** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by methods (January 2015–June 2023).



**FIGURE 8** | Journals with five or more publications on refugee education in Europe (January 2015–June 2023).

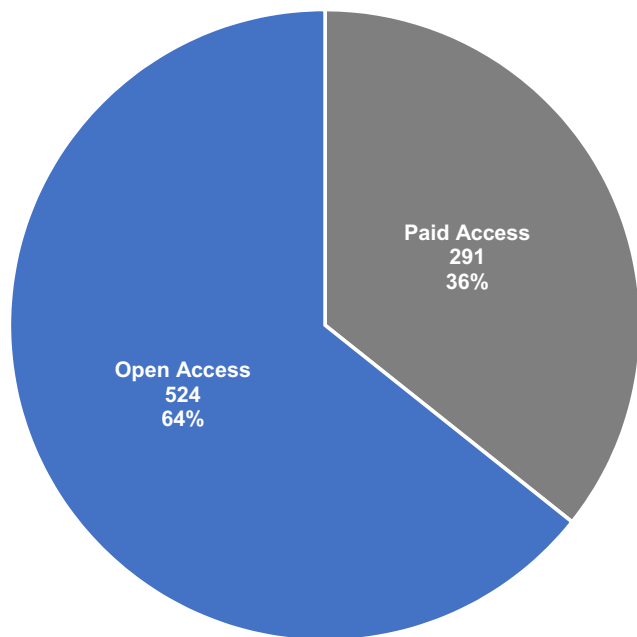
about and for refugees and forced migrants in Europe, 80 peer-reviewed studies were identified as having a thematic focus on *safety*, *belonging* and *success*, thereby warranting their inclusion in the thematic analysis. These 80 studies underwent thematic analysis using a meta-ethnographic synthesis approach (Noblit and Hare 1988; Nye, Melendez-Torres, and Bonell 2016). Accordingly, we present our results to thematically describe the importance of *safety*, *belonging* and *success* in the cultural, economic and political domains of learners with refugee backgrounds. In so doing, we bring our operational frames together of enabling *redistribution* (through dismantling economic barriers), *recognition* (through dismantling cultural barriers) and

*participation* (through dismantling political barriers) to empower learners with refugee backgrounds to participate fully in social life.

## 5.1 | Safety

### 5.1.1 | Personal Safety

Several studies emphasised the importance of the sense of personal safety in educational spaces among learners of refugee backgrounds. In Sweden, McDiarmid et al. (2023) found that



**FIGURE 9** | Number of publications on refugee education in Europe by access (January 2015–June 2023).

positive perceptions of school belonging were associated with lower perceived ethnic discrimination, more prosocial behaviours and lower emotional problems, while negative perceptions of school belonging were associated with more peer problems. In Belgium, Spaas et al. (2022) showed how school-based collaborative mental health care for refugee youth is able to mobilise the school and the family-school interaction as a vehicle for restoring safety and stability in the aftermath of cumulative traumatisation. This emerging theme underscores the pivotal link between the sense of personal safety in educational settings and the overall well-being of learners with refugee backgrounds, highlighting the need to combat bullying and discrimination and emphasising the positive impact of fostering school belonging and collaborative mental health care in mitigating challenges and promoting stability in the aftermath of trauma.

### 5.1.2 | Economic Safety

Several studies also emphasised the importance of safety for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the economic sense. In the Netherlands, van Tubergen (2022) found that adult refugees who were segregated and kept in an asylum centre for a longer period were less likely to invest in their post-migration education, implying that economic insecurity is tied to personal insecurity. In Switzerland, Bitzi and Landolt (2017) revealed how economic insecurity affected unaccompanied minors' attendance, causing them to either skip school or opt to disenroll entirely to seek employment elsewhere. This emerging theme illuminates the crucial role of economic safety in shaping the educational trajectories of learners with refugee backgrounds and reiterates the profound impact of economic insecurity on learners, leading to the prioritisation of immediate employment over educational trajectories.

### 5.1.3 | Cultural Safety

Several studies also pointed to the value of cultural safety for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. In Austria, Bešić et al. (2020) reported refugee youth often experience verbal, social and physical bullying related to their refugee status, language skills and religious affiliation, leading them to recommend hiring staff from diverse cultural backgrounds to counteract the negative effects of bullying students receive due to their refugee status. In England, Sobitan (2022) showed that experiences of school belonging among refugee students were tied to their sense of safety, related to their feelings of being accepted and their relationships with teachers and peers, and their sense of participation, related to participants' desire to contribute to school life and take part in extra activities beyond the classroom. This emerging theme stresses the critical importance of cultural safety for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds, revealing the pervasive challenges of culture-based and language-based discrimination and emphasising the need for diverse cultural representation among staff to counteract these negative experiences.

### 5.1.4 | Political Safety

Several studies also emphasised the importance of safety for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the political sense. In Kosovo, Zevulun et al. (2021) found that refugee children and their families returning to Kosovo had multiple reintegration-related difficulties linked to a lack of political safety, which hindered their educational trajectories. In Turkey, Dababnah et al. (2019) noted that many refugee parents and teachers could not participate in a trauma-informed cooperative training programme for Syrian refugee children with autism because of an inability to travel due to political unrest and safety concerns. This emerging theme highlights the critical role of political safety in shaping the educational experiences of learners with refugee backgrounds and the profound impact of political unrest and safety concerns on the educational trajectories of refugee students and their support networks.

## 5.2 | Belonging

### 5.2.1 | Personal Belonging

Several studies emphasised the importance of the sense of personal belonging to educational spaces among learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. In Finland alongside Australia, Kauko, Wilkinson, and Kohli (2022) explained that pedagogical love can lead to positive teacher-student interactions in a range of ways despite limited shared language, such as showing belief in their students and their contribution to their new society, opening their minds and hearts to students' lived conditions, engaging with their histories and constantly shaping their pedagogy accordingly. In Ireland, Martin et al. (2023) highlighted a range of factors impacting students' experiences of belonging and unbelonging in schools, including local language support, school environment and centrality of children's relationships with teachers,

as well as concerns among children about experiences of bullying, racism and intolerance. This emerging theme stresses the paramount importance of fostering a sense of personal belonging in educational spaces for learners with refugee backgrounds, whether through the cultivation of pedagogical love or the provision of diverse factors such as language support, supportive interpersonal relationships, positive teacher–student interactions and inclusive school environments.

### 5.2.2 | Economic Belonging

Several studies also emphasised the importance of belonging for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the economic sense. In Turkey, Kondakci et al. (2023) found that social and economic discrimination caused Syrian refugees enrolled in higher education to question their sense of belonging stemming from cultural, geographical and religious proximity to Turkey and re-examine their intentions of staying in Turkey forever. In Sweden, Bergnehr (2018) found that the education achievement of children with refugee backgrounds contributed meaningfully to refugee parents' well-being and alleviating the refugee family's acculturative stress stemming from socio-economic hardships such as unemployment, welfare dependence, poor housing and insufficient mastery of the majority language. This emerging theme highlights not just how social and economic discrimination prompt learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds to reassess their sense of belonging, but also the meaningful contribution of children's educational achievement to the alleviation of acculturative stress within refugee families, stemming from these socio-economic challenges.

### 5.2.3 | Cultural Belonging

Several studies also pointed to the value of cultural belonging for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. In Ireland, Horgan et al. (2022) highlighted that refugee children's belonging to school was hindered by concerns over the lack of a diverse language culture and the low value placed on preserving their heritage language. In Turkey, Dereli (2022) found that various autobiographical, relational, cultural and legal factors resulted in both positive and negative senses of belonging for Syrian refugees enrolled in higher education on the university campus. This emerging theme underscores the complex interplay of autobiographical, relational, cultural and legal factors that influence a sense of belonging, such as deep concerns over the absence of a diverse heritage language culture in educational spaces and the pivotal role of cultural connections in shaping educational trajectories.

### 5.2.4 | Political Belonging

Several studies also emphasised the importance of belonging for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the political sense. In Romania, Mareci et al. (2023) found that refugees and asylum seekers felt their own sense of belonging was hampered because their access to education was restricted primarily

by language-related or bureaucratic and legal obstacles. In the Netherlands, Pozzo (2022) revealed how young refugees shifted from Dutch to English to distance themselves from the identities ascribed to them by the Dutch dominant negative political discourse and to reimagine their futures as being in more inclusive environments. This emerging theme reiterates the significant impact of political marginalisation through language-related, bureaucratic and legal barriers on the sense of belonging for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds, highlighting their efforts to distance themselves from negative narratives imposed by populist political discourse to envision more inclusive futures.

## 5.3 | Success

### 5.3.1 | Personal Success

Several studies emphasised the importance of the sense of personal success in educational spaces among learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. In Sweden, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Lebanon, Crul et al. (2019) found that educating refugee children in a segregated parallel school system for extended periods often results in early school leaving or not attending school at all, while including children as soon as possible in regular classes seemed to provide the best chances for school success. In Scotland, Holt and Taylor (2022) found tutors played a key role in building the confidence of children with refugee backgrounds and helping them progress academically, through personalisation and relationship-building strategies and acting as their liaison with class teachers and schools. This emerging theme underscores the importance of supportive social networks for the personal success of learners with refugee backgrounds and reveals how inclusion in regular classes offered positive prospects for educational success, contrasting with prolonged segregation in a parallel school system.

### 5.3.2 | Economic Success

Several studies also emphasised the importance of success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the economic sense. In Germany, Niesta Kayser, Vock, and Wojciechowicz (2021) describe a model for training and integrating refugees with foreign teaching qualifications, highlighting the experiences of refugees who successfully completed the programme and have taken up newly created positions as teachers and pedagogical assistants in German schools. In the Netherlands, van Dijk (2022) described the experiences of refugees in a higher vocational education and training dual programme, where they achieve a new Dutch diploma, language skills and work experience in the Netherlands, leading to employment integration. This emerging theme highlights the importance of success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the economic sense, as showcased in the positive experiences of learners taking part in technical, vocational education and training programmes or the positive impact of recognising foreign professional qualifications leading to learners' successful integration into employment.

### 5.3.3 | Cultural Success

Several studies also pointed to the value of cultural success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds. In Austria, Bešić et al. (2020) found that refugee students stressed the importance of schooling, particularly language acquisition, for them to prosper in the future, with peers and bilingual teachers playing an important role in their efforts to learn German. In Denmark, Kohl (2021) revealed how asylum-seeking women participating in integration programs felt excluded from full integration due to unequal cross-cultural encounters with welfare state employees who individualise responsibility on them for their cultural integration success or failure. This emerging theme highlights the importance of cultural integration for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds as a feature of success, facilitated through the support of peers and bilingual teachers, but also the negative ramifications of individualising responsibility for educational failure for learners, especially women, with no acknowledgement of the extraneous structural burdens they face.

### 5.3.4 | Political Success

Several studies also emphasised the importance of success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in the political sense. In Greece, Hunt (2021) revealed how young refugees face three key institutional bordering practices in Greece, the bordering of space (via encampment), time (via enforced waiting) and public services (via administrative barriers), causing their educational dreams to be diverted or downgraded. In the Netherlands, Ghaemina, Ghorashi, and Crul (2017) underscored how the school careers of highly motivated unaccompanied minors are confronted with a legal obstacle when they turn eighteen that leads them to not obtain a residence permit, making them unable to continue their school career for several years. This emerging theme reveals the reality of institutional bordering practices that learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds must face in their educational experiences, including legal obstacles that impede their ability to have a positive educational trajectory.

## 6 | Discussion and Conclusion

The descriptive analysis of this review revealed several key trends in research on education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants who have arrived in Europe. Principally, Germany, Türkiye, the UK, Sweden and Greece were the most studied countries, while 29 countries had fewer than 10 publications, warranting the need for primary research in underrepresented countries in Europe. Moreover, the educational trajectories of learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in non-formal education and informal education, mathematics education and science education and early childhood education and primary education were under-investigated in Europe, implying the need for further research in these particular educational domains. Moreover, the thematic analysis of this review highlighted the multidimensionality of safety, belonging and success and their connection to economic redistribution, cultural recognition and

political participation, as safety, belonging and success do encompass economic, cultural and political facets of refugees' lives. Tackling economic, cultural and political barriers to safety, belonging and success is thus critical for refugee education. This calls for comprehensive, cross-sector policies that address these interconnected aspects, involving not just educational institutions, but also social services, economic welfare and community organisations in creating supportive environments for refugee learners.

### 6.1 | Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

A key contribution to knowledge of this review is showing how safety, belonging and success work best together, not just in isolation. The review reveals key interconnections between safety, belonging and success in refugee education. First, perceptions of safety in schools strongly influence the sense of belonging of learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in Europe. Experiences of bullying, discrimination and trauma undermine belonging, while supportive relationships and inclusive environments nurture it. This underscores the need for culturally relevant educational leadership that champions anti-bullying policies and trauma-informed teaching practices (Arar, Örüçü, and Ak Küçükçayır 2019; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; Örüçü, Arar, and Mahfouz 2021). Second, a sense of belonging can inspire prospects for educational success for learners of refugee and forced migrant backgrounds in Europe. Segregated schooling obstructs belonging and impedes success, whereas inclusive schooling enables belonging and improves outcomes. This implies that policymakers should prioritise inclusive schooling and provide resources for effective integration strategies across educational levels (Dovigo 2018; Hunt 2023; Proyer, Krause, and Kremsner 2024; Veck, Dovigo, and Proyer 2021). Consequentially, educational success facilitates broader belonging of communities of people with refugee backgrounds, as caregivers' well-being rises when children succeed educationally. Third, safety and success are also intertwined. Economic precarity amplifies the insecurity of families and disrupts their children's education. Meanwhile, educational success promotes economic integration and safety. This suggests the need for holistic support services that address both the educational and economic needs of refugee and forced migrant children and families (Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022; Hunt et al. 2023).

### 6.2 | Limitations

Some methodological limitations should be carefully considered when exploring the report findings. First, the specific context, policies and support systems in Europe may differ significantly from those in non-European countries. Therefore, the transferability of findings to different settings should be approached with caution. However, future reviews could apply the methodology used in this review to other contexts to identify findings on education for refugees, supplementing and broadening the findings of this review. Second, despite the search terms being designed to maximise search sensitivity and literature saturation, it remains likely that the review did not identify all relevant studies. For example, the search



was restricted to English language publications and English abstracts of foreign language papers, risking the exclusion of relevant non-English evidence. Also, while the review's post-2015 timeframe captured recent forced migration patterns, valuable and unique evidence may be available in pre-2015 research. Extending the searches multilingually and tracking longitudinal shifts historically could further strengthen the review.

### 6.3 | Implications for Educational Research

Regardless, the study displayed several methodological strengths that enabled it to contribute to knowledge about education for refugees in Europe. First, the review utilised a rigorous process aligned with PRISMA guidelines for conducting the review, including comprehensive search terms across multiple databases, systematic screening and selection of studies and standardised data extraction (Aleghfeli, Hunt, et al. 2023; Aleghfeli, McIntyre, et al. 2023). Methodological rigour was further enhanced in the review through the use of reliability checks between the coders and the examination of intercoder agreement. This approach sets a benchmark for future systematic reviews in refugee education, emphasising the importance of transparent and replicable methodologies. Second, the review drew from a substantial evidence base of over 800 identified publications on refugee education in Europe since 2015, providing a unique breadth of coverage (HERE 2024). This allowed for descriptive analysis of trends over time, breakdowns by country, education level and type, publication format and methodological approaches, thereby providing valuable contextual insight to the state of research in education for refugees in Europe. This comprehensive approach highlights the need for more large-sample, multi-level, longitudinal studies that are quantitative, qualitative or mixed to better investigate refugee education outcomes, experiences and trajectories. Lastly, this study shows that McIntyre and colleagues' (McIntyre, Neuhaus, and Blennow 2020; McIntyre and Abrams 2021; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021) conceptual framework involving the conflation of theories from Kohli (2011, 2014) and Fraser (2003), originally conceptualised with empirical data, provides a cohesive conceptual lens for data analysis and synthesis, highlighting the potential of such a framework for future evidence syntheses on education *about* and *for* refugees and forced migrants who have arrived in Europe. This suggests that future research could benefit from applying and further developing this integrated theoretical framework, potentially expanding it to include other relevant theories or adapting it for different contexts. Additionally, the study's findings point to gaps in current research, such as the need for more studies on non-formal and informal education, on early childhood and primary education and on mathematics and science education, comparative analyses across European countries and investigations into the long-term educational trajectories of refugees and forced migrants who arrived in Europe.

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### Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this systematic review have been made openly available on the HERE website (<https://hubhere.org>).

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