Leveraging intersectionality for the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe

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Abstract

For disabled forced migrants, the intersection of their identities – being both a forced migrant and living with a disability – is concerningly rarely considered in educational contexts in Europe. We searched the 1,007 resources currently held in the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE) Knowledge Base and found that just 17 studies published over the last decade provide empirical data on the needs, outcomes and/or experiences of this multiply marginalised population. In this chapter, we analyse these studies using Walton's eight prerequisites for advancing intersectionality to explore their potential as critical and emancipatory contributions to disability studies in education. Our application of Walton's approach shows how research is increasingly paying attention to how geography, culture and context shape educational inclusion; to the role of 'knowers and knowing', and particularly in terms of diagnostic procedures; and how disabled refugees' and their families' agency may be supported or restricted. However, there is still substantial room for enquiry which centres learners' own experiences and expectations, based on their own participation in research.

Keywords

Setting the scene

Jano was referred to a special education setting for 14+ year olds arriving in the UK with limited academic background and low English language skills. While most of his fellow students are from an asylum seeker/refugee background, some are from a 'gypsy' background. Jano spoke well of his time at this school, getting to know friends and learning. His mother, on the other hand, felt that this school was not full-time and believed her son needed to be in full-time education ... While Jano appreciated the opportunity of being at school, he spoke of his difficulties with one of the teachers there. 'Because I do not really understand her, she is always very angry. When she puts a red mark next to my name, and a green check sign next to my friends' names, it frustrates me.' He described his feeling in class, saying: 'I get bored and anxious in class because of my condition. But they think I am just a careless student, a brat.' (Fakoush, 2024, p. 137-8)

Disabled[1] refugees[2], Pisani and Grech (2015) argue, live in a shadow: they are rarely considered in humanitarian intervention, hardly theorised in forced migration studies and are mostly left out of Global North-centric disability studies. As the above vignette illustrates, being both a forced migrant and living with a disability also presents a multifaceted challenge for their educational inclusion. Based on a scoping review of studies published between 2015-2024 in the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE) Knowledge Base, this chapter highlights their challenges and identifies the extent to which intersectionality has been meaningfully engaged with in research and practice over the last decade. In doing so, the chapter underscores the importance of recognising the diverse and compounded identities of refugee learners with disabilities.

Rationale: the need for an intersectional approach

Often, refugees and learners with disabilities are treated as separate 'vulnerable' or 'high risk' groups who are subject to inclusion measures (González-García et al., 2017; Samsari et al., 2024). This means that attention is not paid to the specific needs of those who fall into *both* categories. It is crucial to study this intersection, however, rather than taking these aspects of their experience separately, as they can multiply challenges. For example, previous research from Greece has found that students with special educational needs and/or disabilities from

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[1] In line with the Critical Disability Studies approach, here we follow the social model of disability (rather than moral, medical or rehabilitative) which recognises that "(1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment, (2) disability is best characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal (together, the 'social') environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of 'normalcy'" (Hosking, 2008, p. 5). To try to capture the diversity of experience and understanding across Europe, we used the terms 'disability/ies', 'special education', 'special need/s', 'learning difficulty/ies' and 'additional needs' to search the HERE Knowledge Base.

[2] Here, we refer to 'refugees' (i.e. those who have gained refugee status) for brevity; however, we also include in our review those who have applied for international protection (i.e. 'asylum seekers', 'sanctuary seekers' or 'asylum applicants').

'different' ethnic backgrounds suffered from physical, verbal, social and cyber bullying, as the co-presence of their 'different' ethnicity and disability status made them 'stand out' (Samsari et al., 2024).

Administrative procedures also neglect the fact that refugee and migrant students come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and may have experienced traumatic events. By not taking an intersectional approach, refugees are assessed according to a 'norm'. This means that when they come from a different language background to the majority population (especially in schools), they may be subjected to developmental assessments which are designed for monolingual populations and which do not take into account background information such as interrupted schooling, trauma and socio-emotional well-being (Hertel et al., 2021). As a result, multilingual children such as refugees may be misdiagnosed or 'overdiagnosed' with developmental language disorders, and their families may even be assumed to have 'cognitive impairments' if they struggle to follow the technical vocabulary used in meetings with schools and other practitioners (Dovigo, 2019).

It is therefore vital to not only investigate how refugees with disabilities experience education as a refugee *or* as a learner with a disability, but also the *compound* impacts of these aspects of learners' identities – what Walton et al. (2020) have termed 'compounded exclusion'.

With this said, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties in carrying out such research. Across Europe, there is a lack of accurate national-level data on the number of learners with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds (Samsari et al., 2024), and refugees specifically suffer from "prolonged invisibility" within official educational paths, due to a lack of resources and systematic inclusion measures (Dovigo, 2019, p. 171). Furthermore, there are challenges

with determining the presence of the disability or learning difficulty itself. For migrant learners, some may have an official diagnosis from the new country, whereas others' disabilities may be based on parents' "assertion or consent" (Samsari et al., 2024, p. 3). Still other families may not want to acknowledge the disability due to stigma or prior cultural associations (Adams & Santos, 2022; Daudji et al., 2011).

A call to leverage intersectionality

To build towards truly inclusive education, it is necessary to analyse how existing knowledge has advanced our understanding of how 'categories of difference' may overlap and multiply one's marginalisation. Here, we use Walton's (2023) eight prerequisites for advancing intersectionality to do so (see Table 1). These constituent concepts were created in the context of disability studies in education, in response to a concern that intersectionality can be diminished, misrepresented or caricatured without certain underpinning principles.

In what follows, we take each of the prerequisites separately (without suggesting that they operate individually), to identify how each has been mobilised in the research literature on refugee education in Europe since 2015. This is not intended as a critique of the literature, but rather an analysis of the state of play.

Prerequisites for advancing intersectionality	Without which, intersectionality...
Reckoning with power and oppression	Becomes a fantasy-land of diversity with assumed equality
Historicity	Risks exceptionalism as disadvantage is viewed as a temporary aberration
A theory of knowledge and knowers	Risks essentializing people according to their characteristics and individualizing their problems
Geography, culture and context	Risks universalism by not recognizing that regimes of inequality work differently in different locations
Justice	Risks abstraction and loses its emancipatory impact on people's lived experience of oppression
Relationality	Risks silos and suspicion as intersectional allyship becomes impossible, resulting in polarization and competition
Embodiment	Risks symbolism and the creation of disembodied hierarchies of inequality
Agency	Risks determinism and saviourism, and the erasure of self and community advocacy

Table 1. Prerequisite propositions for advancing intersectionality. From Walton (2023)

How has intersectionality been leveraged in the literature on refugee learners with disabilities since 2015?

Reckoning with power and oppression

The first prerequisite for an intersectional approach, according to Walton (2023, p. 254), is that it must address the workings of power and oppression which perpetuate normative orders – in order to recognise "which differences make a difference". Without acknowledging unequal power dynamics at play, we perpetuate normative orders and celebrations of difference which render forms of oppression such as ableism and racism invisible.

In the case of refugee learners with disabilities in Europe, it can be said that research published since 2015 has considered the workings of power in terms of rights, laws and policies (whether international, national or institutional) on inclusive education. For example, several authors (Bacakova, 2023; Elliott et al., 2019; Steigmann, 2020) offer a reading of key laws and conventions: such as UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and, specifically, its relevant articles on education; the European Charter of Fundamental Rights; the Qualification Directive; and the Reception Directive (for receiving asylum applicants). In doing so, the authors analyse, for instance, how children's right to education is protected, but not their right to *inclusive* education (Bacakova, 2023; Steigmann, 2020).

The research also offers analyses of national-level policies, and recommends that in countries such as Greece, specific policies are created on refugee children with disabilities which are based in social justice and solidarity (Giavrimis, 2023). Giavrimis argues that the debate on educational policy should be reignited, to highlight power relations and conflicts of interest and the need to incorporate an intercultural approach. Other authors go further, in calling for the entire framework of inclusive education to be overhauled (Migliarini, 2017): to instead take a focus on rights and skills, rather than needs (Istif Inci et al., 2024); to foster environments of acceptance and respect within multicultural classes (Subasi Singh et al., 2021); to promote understanding and improvement of the experiences of refugee families among all actors involved (Elliott et al., 2019); and to offer support services which ensure that refugee learners and their families are prepared and informed, and are given space to share their educational and social expectations (Giavrimis, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Migliarini, 2017).

Indeed, the literature suggests various ways in which disabled refugees and their families are *disempowered.* Klopota and Klopota (2024), for example, observe that local public

organisations do not sufficiently defend their interests; while Elliott et al. (2019) note that schools assist disabled refugee children 'off their own backs': adjusting their support however they can, in their own way, without official standards or frameworks. More generally, disabled refugee children and their families are not recognised or represented, and consequently resources and support are misdistributed (Çakiray, 2024). Some authors argue that they are expected to simply 'blend into' the host society by learning majority languages and following a Eurocentric curriculum, with individual forms of (e.g. linguistic) support which operate separately (Bhatti et al., 2024; Migliarini, 2020).

Parents can feel further disempowered by not being included in decisions – or indeed discussions – about their children's needs, due to being ignored by health and education professionals and/or struggling with the language barrier (Bhatti et al., 2024; Elliott et al., 2019).

Historicity

'Historicity' refers to the recognition of the historical forces which have co-constructed disability, race, gender and other identities, and which have indeed created 'refugeeness' (Walton, 2023) – such as geopolitics, global racial capital and ecocide. Without this recognition, for Walton, intersectional oppression and its resulting educational disadvantages may be seen as individualised and/or transient phenomena, and the presence of refugees, specifically, may be seen as a 'given'. Historicity was the most notably missing dimension across the included studies; apart from in Migliarini's (2020) explorations of the problematic foundations and development of inclusive education in Italy.

A theory of knowledge and knowers

According to Walton (2023, p. 254), intersectionality also requires a consideration of "who knows what about whom and how they come by this knowledge", as well as "what counts as legitimate knowledge about people's lives and experiences". This means that disabled people must be recognised as experts in their own lives, to avoid stereotyping, essentialising, individualising, over-focusing on difference and making the individual disabled learner the 'problem'.

The issue of knowledge and knowers is well covered in the 17 studies included in this review, and particularly in terms of a) disability assessment procedures, and b) how research on disabled refugees' inclusion is designed and carried out. Firstly, when it comes to assessment processes for newly arriving learners, various authors problematise the procedures currently in place – and especially as they neglect learners' and their families' own knowledge of their experiences (Bhatti et al., 2024; Jäger et al., 2021). Not considering this 'legitimate knowledge' can mean that refugee children with limited local language proficiency (but without special needs) can be misplaced in the SEN category, which is "inappropriate and unhelpful" (Bhatti et al., 2024, p. 133).

Secondly, the research to date reckons with a 'theory of knowledge and knowers' by calling for research which centres learners' own perspectives, and which employs accessible and participatory methods (Bešić et al., 2018a; 2018b; Elliott et al., 2019; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Migliarini, 2020). However, the majority of the 17 studies included in this review did not meet this goal. Most specifically sought to explore their educational and

social inclusion needs and challenges, but did so via teachers' or parents' perspectives (Bhatti et al., 2024; Çakiray, 2024; Eker et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2019; Giavrimis, 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Koukou et al., 2024; Migliarini 2017; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Only 4 studies involved young refugees with disabilities as participants: with 3 being interview-based (Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Migliarini, 2017), and the other being based around Krip-Hop-informed workshops (Migliarini, 2020).

Geography, culture and context

Walton (2023) also reminds us that geography, culture and context interact with individual identities to either privilege or disprivilege people – and that ignoring this fact means that experience may be deemed universal. 'Inclusive' education may be based on normative experiences of white children in well-resourced contexts, for example, whereas around the world, school, community and systemic factors (including legal frameworks and economic opportunities) can combine to influence learning outcomes. The research included in this review takes this dimension into account by analysing country, region and institution-specific policies and practices on inclusive education (including financing), and by addressing learners' and their families' perspectives on disability and their experiences in their home countries.

Firstly, the studies critique country-specific systems and institutions. They do this by problematising the 'one size fits all' approach to inclusion in the Czech Republic and the UK, for example (Bhatti et al., 2024; Klopota & Klopota, 2024), or the 'double focus' in Italy which

keeps questions of disability separate from those of cultural diversity (Migliarini, 2017). Authors discuss how inclusion is 'managed', and at what level of government (e.g. Elliott et al., 2019), and the issue of a lack of national-level, disaggregated data on displaced populations with disabilities (e.g. Bešić et al., 2018a; 2018b; Çakiray, 2024; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Another key component of each context is its finances, and the budgets allocated for inclusive education. Funding issues (in terms of structural deficits and a lack of assistance to individuals) are reported in Germany, Greece, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Türkiye (Çakiray, 2024; Eker et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2019; Giavrimis, 2023; Istif Inci et al., 2024; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023; Steigmann, 2020). This means that school resources may be inadequate; there is a lack of qualified staff; systems are 'overburdened'; and learners may not have access to certain services, such as multilingual and multicultural support, or adequate and accessible learning materials (Bhatti et al., 2024; Giavrimis, 2023; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Steigmann, 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021).

Secondly, the research provides (a smaller amount of) data on the geographies, cultures and contexts of disabled refugee learners' home countries. This includes the fact that their educational history or even chronological age might be unknown; that some children had not had a diagnosis or needs assessment in their home country; and that their needs had only become evident after arrival in the new country (Elliott et al., 2019). Even if a child's disability was previously recognised, their status may not be legalised in the new country if foreign medical documents and development plans cannot be equated (Jäger, 2021; Klopota & Klopota, 2024). The studies also emphasise that there are different approaches to disability in different contexts, and therefore staff working with disabled refugee learners and their families should be provided with tools and knowledge for recognising their specific needs – such as trauma-sensitive language acquisition (Subasi Singh et al., 2021).

Justice

Next, for Walton (2023), a commitment to justice and emancipation – which is translated into activism and action – must also be central to intersectionality, to avoid it becoming simply an abstract concept. This requires genuine dialogue between schools, learners and parents; a focus on strengths, rather than only vulnerability or failure; person-centred planning; and seeing disabled refugee learners as "thinking, individual and reciprocal" (p. 255).

Such a commitment to justice can be seen in the studies' calls to action to improve conditions for disabled refugee learners. For example, the authors demand the development of appropriate facilities and provision of reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunities (Giavrimis, 2023). They specify the need for visual aids, adapting lunch menus, considering school assembly content and being flexible during settling-in for children who are separated from their parents for the first time (Elliott et al., 2019). In mainstream classrooms, they call for support and services to be increased, including adapting educational materials in line with each child's individual characteristics, and especially when they are learning a new language (Klopota & Klopota, 2024).

In terms of research, 'emancipatory action' can be understood to mean centring the voices of disabled refugee learners and their families and trying to understand, as far as possible, their expectations and experiences of inclusion pathways (and indeed how these change); as well as aiming for societal change. Migliarini (2017), as one example, proposes doing so via longitudinal studies which track the educational trajectories of these learners – including

through job training and migration status determination procedures – to identify effective interventions.

Relationality

Intersectional work also requires a focus on relationality: meaning allowing for dialogue, allyship and interdependency; paying attention to how interest groups either work in silos or collaboratively; and recognising that conflict is inevitable and potentially generative (Walton, 2023). It also means not fixating on one 'axis of oppression', such as disability-based discrimination, while ignoring others such as homophobia.

One key aspect in this regard is how disabled refugee learners relate to educators. The studies provide numerous insights on this relationship and argue for updated, structured and robust teacher training – covering interculturality, disability and linguistic diversity – to support it (Bhatti et al., 2024; Çakiray, 2024; Giavrimis, 2023; Koukou et al., 2024; Steigmann, 2020). This training, it is recommended, should also be based in the social model of disability; address intersectional, anti-racist discourse; and cover how trauma, frustration due to limited local language skills, victimisation, and poverty can manifest (Elliott et al., 2019; Migliarini, 2017). Teachers should also be provided with opportunities, time and resources for learning from the different communities they work with (Koukou et al., 2024), to strengthen their awareness and understanding and, overall, to improve the well-being of disabled refugee children (Elliott et al., 2019).

Many studies also spoke of existing supportive relationships and social resources. For instance, they describe how teachers view the inclusion of refugee children with disabilities in schools as a rights-based commitment (Giavrimis, 2023). Both teachers and parents appreciate the support of interpreters (Eker et al., 2023) ab nd note the impact of other specific individuals who use their initiative or go 'out of their way' to help (Elliott et al., 2019). In addition, Elliott et al. note the importance of community support for refugee families, which in Northern Ireland takes the form of English language classes and homework support groups.

The research points to the essential need for collaboration between all actors involved in inclusive education, to build stronger networks and communication practices (Çakiray, 2024; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Migliarini, 2017; Subasi Singh et al., 2021) - as well as between the fields of special education and intercultural education (Koukou et al., 2024). Increased collaboration and cooperation would help to build stronger networks and communication practices, increase transparency between professionals, aid assessments and streamline processes (Bhatti et al., 2024; Migliarini, 2017). While support workers or social workers can establish such initial bridges between families, agencies, and schools, all parties must work to maintain these links (Elliott et al., 2019).

Embodiment

Walton (2023, p. 255) argues that it is important to remember that intersectionality is an embodied experience, as this pushes us to recognise that there is no hierarchy in regimes of inequality. Indeed, learners are simultaneously "raced, gendered and abled", rather than

sequentially. Neoliberal regimes view certain bodies as 'ideal' or 'fit', and others as being in need of control, classification, punishment or scrutiny.

Related to the previous point of relationality, and the need to consider 'multiple axes of oppression', the studies indeed highlight how disabled refugee learners' aspects of 'difference' can multiply discrimination against them. For example, it was reported that refugee students in Türkiye face a "dual prejudice and discrimination against them as both refugees and students with disabilities" (Istif Inci et al., 2024, p. 9). In Austria, too, Bešić et al. (2018a) found that both teachers' and the general public's attitudes towards the inclusion of (refugee) students with(out) disabilities are influenced by student's attributes such as refugee status and disability type, with these attributes independently linked to more negative attitudes. When gender was introduced into Bešić et al.'s analysis, teachers and the general public were found to have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of Austrian girls into mainstream primary schools than refugee girls, and towards the inclusion of girls with a physical disability than those with behavioural disorders. Therefore, the authors argue that "it is justified to assume that refugee girls with disabilities experience intersectional discrimination" (p. 463). Such prejudices can lead some refugee students to be unwilling to disclose their disability at all, for fear of discrimination and stigmatisation (Istif Inci et al., 2024).

While some studies explicitly use an intersectional lens to investigate how learners' identities may overlap and compound their marginalisation, this is not widespread across the included literature (Bacakova, 2023; Bešić et al., 2018a; 2018b; Giavrimis, 2023; Migliarini, 2017; 2020; Subasi Singh et al., 2021). Authors instead describe refugees with disabilities as a 'shadow population' (Istif Inci et al., 2024), 'vulnerable' (Bacakova, 2023), 'twice a minority' (Kaya & Yıldız, 2023), 'multiple disadvantaged' (Bešić et al., 2018a), 'multiply marginalized'

(Migliarini, 2020) or 'doubly disadvantaged' (Bhatti et al., 2024), or more neutrally as having a 'dual identity' (Giavrimis, 2023) – even if it was noted that this is an intersection of "two negatively constructed attributes" (p. 242).

Even where intersectionality is a central concept to the research, one issue is that the studies lack data on how exactly learners' experiences are shaped by *both* their forced migration background and their disability. For example, interview excerpts provided by Migliarini (2020) focus on disabled refugee learners' identities as young (Black) migrants, rather than how their experiences are shaped by their disability or learning difficulties. Another limitation, in Bešić et al. (2018a; 2018b) is that they did not necessarily test attitudes towards *refugees*, specifically, but rather towards learners with limited local language abilities.

Agency

Finally, agency must also be central to discussions of intersectionality, to avoid people appearing as simply the "sum of their constituent (devalued) identities with predetermined destinies" (Walton, 2023, p. 255). Agentic approaches also encapsulate (collective) resistance, hope and reclaiming control: not only by disabled learners, but also by their families and allies. For researchers, this necessitates co-producing and celebrating stories of resistance. In the studies included in this review, it is striking that only one study explicitly points to disabled young refugees' own "hard work, courage, moral strength, and solidarity" – as well as their "enormous resilience" (Istif Inci et al., 2024, p. 12).

The dimension of 'agency' mostly features in relation to parents' empowerment via supports such as translation and counselling services, information on available resources and opportunities for engagement with the education system. Steigmann (2020) tied parents' agency to their 'capacity', in terms of having the knowledge, language skills, confidence and power to act (although Steigmann emphasises that parents are not a homogeneous group, and that personal conditions and background can influence the support required and obtained). Other authors, too, speak of parents being limited by a lack of knowledge on where to find specialist advice, medical support, interpreters, resource centres and information on activities for disabled children; and furthermore, they may not be aware that their child can attend school at all (Bhatti et al., 2024; Klopota & Klopota, 2024; Subasi Singh et al., 2021).

Subasi Singh et al. (2021) highlight how parents suffer from a lack of communication from schools, a vague diagnostic process, a lack of opportunities to engage and general uncertainty. All of these factors limit their agency, as they have little say when it comes to inclusion and wider educational processes. In an overlap with the dimension of 'relationality', agency can be fostered by support workers who 'empower' refugee families by helping them to build their skills and knowledge, increase their independence and promote their integration into their new societies – performing a 'bridging' role between families and health, social, legal, political and education services (Elliott et al., 2019).

Conclusion

To conclude, here we have mobilised Walton's (2023) prerequisites for advancing intersectionality to illustrate how previous studies on the educational inclusion of refugees with disabilities in Europe have taken each individual concept into account. Our analysis demonstrates the utility of this approach. Unsurprisingly, no study addressed all 8 constituent concepts, but all concepts were present to some degree. Our application of Walton's approach shows how research is increasingly paying attention to how geography, culture and context shape educational inclusion; to the role of 'knowers and knowing', and particularly in terms of diagnostic procedures; and how disabled refugees' and their families' agency may be supported or restricted, particularly. However, there is still substantial room for enquiry which centres learners' own experiences and expectations, based on their own participation in research (rather than being retold by teachers or parents).

We can see the potential of future research which uses these prerequisites as a foundation, and which contributes to an understanding of each concept while also promoting a global understanding of both their interconnectedness and how they work as a composite. This means undertaking broad analyses of all factors which may shape each disabled refugee learner's educational trajectory, to gain a holistic understanding of the individual, before outlining how these insights can be translated into concrete, emancipatory actions. This is vital if we are to avoid intersectionality being simply an abstract concept, and to truly deliver the "promise of intersectionality as a necessary condition for the realization of socially just, inclusive and democratic education" (Walton, 2023, p. 249).

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