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# Loneliness, lack of support, and educational challenges: teachers' experiences working with refugee children

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For the first time, Lithuania has faced such a flow of refugee families with children, and it is natural that until now there is not enough experience and research in the education of refugee children in Lithuania. Until now, the focus has been on the integration and socialization of refugees, with very little attention paid to the education of refugee children in early childhood education settings. The education of refugee children and the opportunities to provide it globally became more important in 2022 when Ukrainian refugees were forced to flee their homes because of the war. This paper aims to reveal the experiences of Lithuanian teachers who, as soon as the war started, received refugee children in their classes without any prior information or adequate preparation. A study was carried out to uncover preschool teachers' experiences of working with refugee children, so the following research questions are raised - what are the experiences of preschool teachers working with children with refugee status? What challenges do preschool teachers face? How do preschool teachers work with refugee children without official descriptions prepared by the State of Lithuania? A thematic analysis was applied. The results of the study revealed that pre-school teachers faced different educational challenges when educating refugee children: lack of foreign language skills, cultural differences, lack of support from professionals when working with refugee children, etc. The study found that teachers were intensively choosing self-initiated learning to improve their professional knowledge in order to ensure a quality education process for refugee children in early childhood education institutions. Teachers independently searched for suitable materials for the education of refugee children and adapted existing programs and guidelines to refugee children in their groups.

## KEYWORDS

early childhood education, teacher, teachers' experiences, education of refugee children, educational challenges

## Introduction

The education of refugee children is a new phenomenon that has not been widely studied. The European education system has considerable experience in educating children of ethnic minorities, but there is still very little research that analyses the education of refugee children, as the education of refugee and immigrant children is very different (De Wal Pastoor, 2016). In order to adequately address the challenges of the education of refugee children, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports must, first of all, maintain close relationships with teachers who work in various educational institutions (Taskin and Erdemli, 2018). Migrants with refugee status are a particularly vulnerable social group in society, especially in their first years of migration, when families have to face different cultures, do not speak the local language,

often have health problems and have very limited employment, which can lead to the risk of social isolation (Stewart and Shaffer, 2015). Gambaro et al. (2021) claim that proper integration of refugee children into early childhood education institutions not only guarantees children's becoming socially active members of the country, but also encourages parents to do the same. Also, the research conducted by these authors in Germany showed that the majority of refugee migrants found work thanks to social contacts. Parents, seeing their children happy in early childhood education, accept the traditional holidays, language, and people of that country more positively. Also, refugee children's attendance at pre-school establishments allows parents to devote more time to their integration into the country's system and language learning.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sports of Lithuania has prepared several plans for the integration of immigrants and refugees, but there are no special education plans specifically addressing the education of refugee children. In the description of preschool children's achievements (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, 2014), the following 12 areas of child's educational achievements have been marked out: physical activity; self-concept and self-esteem; relationship with adults and peers; spoken and written language; environmental cognition; calculation and measurement; esthetic perception and artistic expression; initiative and perseverance; exploration; problem-solving; creativity and ability to learn. As can be seen, the description does not mention the development of interculturality. As a comparison, one can take the main areas-values of Finnish child education: the value of childhood; growing as a person; children's rights; equality and equity; family diversity; healthy and sustainable lifestyle (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

In Lithuania, researchers are mostly interested in the education of refugee children in general education schools or the possibilities of non-formal education, but very little is known about how the education of such children takes place in pre-school establishments (Zaleskienė and Kvederavičiūtė, 2017; Poškevičė and Požerienė, 2020). Research shows (Park et al., 2018) that early childhood education and care programs and their proper implementation are an important means by which host countries can reduce many of the risks children face. Actions aimed at facilitating the successful integration of refugee children and their families will bring benefits both to the refugees themselves and to the society into which they will be integrated. Early childhood education programs can meet the diverse needs unique to young refugees while supporting their healthy development. Currently, there is not a single official educational program in Lithuania created for early childhood teachers to educate children with refugee status. Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (2011) states that "The purpose of early childhood education is to help the child meet his natural, cultural, as well as ethnic, social and cognitive needs," but there is no specific program on how to adapt the early childhood education programs to refugee children and guarantee their natural, cultural, ethnic and social needs. There is also a lack of research in Lithuania that would not only examine the teacher's readiness to work with refugee children, but would also explain how teachers manage to educate children who already live and attend pre-school establishments in Lithuania.

According to the Lithuanian Education News (2021), about 40 general education teachers have already been trained to work with refugee children and are working and educating children in different

educational institutions, but there is no official data on the training of pre-school teachers and on the disclosure of pre-school teachers' experiences in working with refugee children. TALIS survey (2018) shows that only 34.7% of primary school teachers in Lithuania are prepared to work in an intercultural environment, but there is no official data on the training of pre-school teachers, which raises the following research questions: What are the experiences of pre-school teachers in working with refugee children? What are the challenges that pre-school teachers face? How do pre-school teachers work with refugee children who are not officially registered by the Lithuanian state?

## Theoretical part

There are different definitions of refugee status in the literature sources but the meaning and significance of most of them remain the same. A refugee is defined as a person who leaves his country because of insecurity, where the state not only does not protect its citizens but also persecutes them. Refugees, due to various circumstances, are obliged to leave their country due to real threats to their lives or the health of their family members – war, religious, political or other repression. UNHCR (2024) provides the following official definition of a refugee: "A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their country due to persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal or religious violence are the main causes of refugees fleeing their countries." There is no defined concept such as "refugee child" in Lithuanian, but such a description is provided by UNHCR (1987) stating that a refugee child is a child who has received or is seeking refugee status based on the refugee status of accompanying parents or family members. The situation is much more complicated when the child does not have any official documents and accompanying adults who could confirm the country of birth, nationality or age of the child. Such children are confirmed as unaccompanied minors by the law of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, then the process of obtaining refugee status becomes much more complicated and sensitive.

Much attention is paid to the education of refugee children in foreign countries. Many countries of the European Union have special education programs that are designed to facilitate the integration of immigrant and refugee children. The Finnish Ministry of Science and Education clearly emphasizes the right of multicultural children to religion, mother tongue, and ethnicity of their culture in its early childhood and pre-primary education program. Teachers are encouraged not only to integrate children into the Finnish education system, but also to promote the preservation of the ethnicity of those children (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). In Finland, a lot of attention is paid to ensuring equal rights regardless of a person's race or religion. In Finland, the number of children and parents of multicultural backgrounds is increasing every year, so the task of improving early childhood and pre-primary programs in this area is becoming more and more important. The application of multicultural education development programs is particularly important in the capital of Finland, Helsinki, and its county, 11 where about 40 percent of immigrants live. According to estimates, about 25 percent of students in Finland have a multicultural background. This

also means that the number of children of other nationalities in pre-school education establishments is constantly growing (Ojala, 2010). With the growing number of refugee children in different countries of the world, it is necessary to pay attention not only to educational programs, but also to understand that school-age refugees are a particularly sensitive part of society. Despite the fact that they were forcibly transferred to another country, educational system programs in various countries are not always properly adapted to meet the educational needs of such children. The integration of these children into the education system is a huge challenge not only for the children themselves and their families, but also for the organizers of educational programs. The success or lack of integration in schools can affect not only the social integration of children but also their further integration into the labor market (Cerna, 2019).

Meanwhile, Lithuania lacks a clear definition of “refugee child,” which means that refugee children are not given special integration or educational conditions. Instead, they are subject to the same rules and integration processes as adult refugees. Different countries have their own approaches to providing educational opportunities for refugee children. Each country’s experiences in working with and educating refugee children vary depending on their history and current situation. However, there are still uncertainties about the most appropriate methods for educating refugee children and how these methods can be applied in mainstream educational settings. Educating refugee children is a challenging task that requires not only the professional training of teachers but also support from the public and the Ministry of Education. The lack of data about the education of refugee children further complicates the development and application of appropriate programs. The role of the teacher in the context of refugee education is critical. Teachers in Lithuania and globally do not have precise and clear programs for working with refugee children. As a result, they have to rely on their own experience, skills, and moral values.

It is important to consider not only the adaptability of educational programs, but also the readiness of teachers to work with refugee children responding to the children’s psychological state. Future teachers in Canada are trained in advance to work with refugee children while still in university. The task of future teachers when working with refugee children is not only to develop appropriate academic skills, English language, but also to instill self-confidence, considering the fact that most children have experienced or are experiencing stress of separation from their parents and depression (Gagné et al., 2017). Curricula that are designed and developed specifically for refugee children with limited prior schooling enable teachers to adapt appropriate educational and teaching models. The main goal of teachers is not only to look into the future and create educational plans for children, but to help them fill the existing gaps and move forward with the help of the teacher, considering the children’s experience. The task of teachers in educating and working with refugee children becomes not only the achievements of academic knowledge, but also everyday life tasks, such as social rules, choosing and providing appropriate clothes, providing school stationery, maintaining and managing children’s IT equipment. Teachers’ special attention shall be paid to helping children with homework and ensuring the application of all other possible educational and teaching strategies (Cerna, 2019).

A person with refugee status is defined differently in different countries of the world, but the essence remains the same. In Lithuania, a clear definition of the concept of “refugee child” is missing, so special

integration or educational conditions for refugee children have not been discerned, but the same rules and integration processes as for adult refugees shall apply. In summary, it could be said that various foreign countries have their own views on the opportunities for the education of refugee children. Depending on the history and the situation, different countries have different experiences in working with and educating refugee children. On the other hand, when educating refugee children, it is still unclear which methods are the most appropriate and how to apply them in general education institutions. Educating refugee children is not an easy task, as it requires not only the professional training of teachers, but also the help of society and the Ministry of Education. The problem related to the collection of educational data of refugee children further complicates the development and application of appropriate programs. The role of the teacher becomes critically important in the context of refugee education. Teachers do not have precise and clear programs for working with refugee children not only in Lithuania, but also in the context of the whole world, so they have to rely on their experience, skills and moral values.

Upon reviewing the primary national plans and programs for pre-school and pre-primary education in Lithuania, it has been found that there are no specific programs designed for the education of refugee children. The existing laws, programs, and recommendations for preschool and pre-primary education prepared by the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science are outdated and have not been updated to meet the needs of refugee children. It is the responsibility of the education institutions, working groups, and teachers to select appropriate curricula and methods to educate not only refugee children, but also children of other nationalities, religions, or races. The current attention given to migrant children and national minorities is insufficient to ensure a quality education process for these children in Lithuania. None of the existing programs or guidelines for pre-school and pre-primary education staff mention children with refugee status, and there is no specific focus on the education of such children.

## Materials and methods

### Sample

From September 2022 to November 2022, 10 research participants, pre-school teachers currently working with refugee children in educational institutions, were interviewed. Convenience sampling was used – the sample was made up of the teachers most easily accessible to the researcher. A “snowball” methodology was also used, where the sample units were selected from people who know other people working with refugee children in pre-school education establishments. All the teachers participated in this study voluntarily. To protect their privacy and guarantee their anonymous participation, participants of interviews are named I1, I2...I10 to represent their thoughts during interviews.

### Procedure

The chosen method of qualitative data collection is an in-depth interview. The individual qualitative interview is one of the most commonly used forms of research data collection. When it is conducted with one person, this method is called in-depth. The aim of this type of interview is to gain the perspective of the interviewee

in order to make the interview as comprehensive as possible by discussing the research topic in detail. The aim of an in-depth interview is to explore the participants' perspective on the phenomenon under study as deeply and clearly as possible. It is not a dialog-based interview because the focus is not on the interview itself but on the information provided by the research participant. It is important for the researcher to elicit the narrative by asking questions in the most subtle sense and in the most subtle way. The aim is for the participant to speak frankly, giving his/her personal views and experiences. The in-depth interview aims to find out as much as possible and to understand the phenomenon from the researcher's perspective. Establishing a sincere and trusting relationship between the participant and the researcher is one of the most important aspects of the research, to ensure that the participant is open, sincere, trusting and unafraid to reveal his/her true opinion, whatever it may be. This approach is best used when the researcher wants to gain insight into the personal views of each participant, specifically their experiences and perspectives, and then to collate all the available data. It is also a good choice of method for topics that have not yet been explored (Gaižauskienė and Valavičienė, 2016).

The researchers posted information about the study on social media in special groups for preschool and pre-primary teachers. Teachers who were interested in participating in the study contacted the researchers themselves by phone or email. The potential subjects were informed about the process, objectives, and content of the study. They were assured that the interviews would be anonymous, and their personal data would not be disclosed in any way during the study. Once the exact time and date of the interview had been decided, the researchers reconfirmed the day before the meeting that the participants had not changed their minds and were still willing to take part in the study. All participants responded positively. The meetings with the subjects were conducted online, and on average, each interview lasted about 1 h. The interview questions were developed based on a theoretical analysis of the topic. The main, semi-structured interview questions emerged from the existing key issues. Participants were asked to share their feelings about working with refugee children, the biggest challenges they faced, the kind of support given to teachers from other professionals such as psychologists, governmental institutions, or their own leaders and other questions. The researchers aimed to listen to each participant's experience as much as possible, trying to clarify participants' answers if they were not detailed enough while ensuring the comfort and privacy of the participants. Some of the interviews were extremely sensitive and emotional. Teachers shared their experiences openly and were not afraid to show their feelings, emotions, or tears.

## Data analysis

The chosen method of qualitative data analysis is thematic analysis (TA). This method is not new but is widely used in the field of qualitative research. TA was developed in the 1970s, influenced by the methodological foundations of qualitative content analysis, phenomenology, and ethnographic research. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to examine and analyze research data. Systematic analysis helps to identify typical patterns and formulate topics related to the research problem (Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas, 2017). This analysis emphasizes language analysis itself because, when using thematic analysis, it is crucial for the researcher to focus on what is said

in the text content rather than how it is said. During the analysis, it is important for the researcher to look for recurring themes in the stories. After summarizing, analyzing, and comparing thematic elements, the researcher can identify and categorize the text into themes for further analysis (Riessman, 2005). Thematic analysis, while coding the data, helps to identify typical patterns and formulate topics related to the research problem. Using this method of analysis, great attention is paid to the analysis of the received data because it is crucial to properly code the data when determining the topics. The proper selection of topics will help the researcher to reveal the researched phenomenon itself (Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas, 2017). The principles of thematic analysis—coding data, identifying themes, refining those themes, and reporting findings—are fundamentally aligned with other qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis. Thematic analysis is a powerful technique for analyzing qualitative data. It involves the clear identification and reporting of patterns within a dataset, which are then interpreted to reveal their underlying meanings. These patterns emerge distinctly from a comprehensive understanding of the keywords used by participants. The thematic analysis process is characterized by its systematic nature, employing a structured and sequential methodology for the interpretation of research data. Each stage builds upon the preceding one, culminating in a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data. This organized framework not only enhances the consistency and replicability of the findings but also establishes clear connections among the data, its interpretation, and the resulting conclusions. By adhering to this systematic approach, we ensure thoroughness while effectively reducing potential bias, thereby enhancing the credibility and impact of our findings (Naeem et al., 2023). The analytical procedure consisted of the following phases:

### 1st phase. Familiarization with the data

In thematic analysis, the first step is to familiarize yourself with the data. High-quality audio recordings and verbatim transcriptions are essential for documenting interviews. During the interviews, researchers already highlighted the patterns so that relevant statements could be identified. The researchers conducted verbatim transcriptions of the digitally recorded interviews. Then, they carefully reviewed the transcribed materials multiple times to ensure accuracy. While reading for the 2nd and 3rd times, the codes have become very obvious and repetitive in many interviews.

### 2nd phase. Identification of the codes

In the second stage, each interview transcript was reviewed again. Initial codes were created to identify any relevant features of the data related to the research topic, which is teachers' experiences working with refugee children. In thematic analysis, it is mostly important to identify and notice the most repeated keywords in the data, which will later would be grouped under a code. It is important to mention that a keyword may consist of not only a single word but also phrases that have significant meanings for the research. These codes represented the most basic part of the data that could be evaluated in a meaningful way for the research topic. They were applied to any word, sentence, or paragraph that the researcher found noteworthy. The initial codes are listed in [Figure 1](#).



### 3rd phase. Identification of common themes

Once the data has been coded, it can be collated, and the search for themes can begin. Themes are not the direct representation of the data's value; rather, they emerge from an analytical and comparative process. Developing themes involves carefully grouping related codes to identify meaningful patterns that provide significant insights into the research question. The researchers reviewed and organized data extracts for each theme, conducted detailed analysis, identified subthemes, and created concise titles for each theme to convey their meaning immediately (Naeem et al., 2023). This process was repeated by researchers until the final theme map aligned with the research

objectives. After collecting the initial codes, they were grouped into broader themes, including “Language barrier,” “Lived experience of everyday education,” and “Almighty teacher.” These themes were then combined to create a thematic map (refer to Figure 2) that reflects the findings of the study and sheds light on the experiences of early childhood education teachers in teaching refugee children.

### 4th phase

In the final phase, we organized developed themes, corresponding data extracts, and created reports. We weaved the themes with analytic narratives and included representative quotes.

Core themes	Subthemes	Codes
Language barrier	Lack of foreign language skills	Lack of English and Russian language, lack of a common language, miscommunication due to language barrier.
	Use of information technologies for language	Daily Google translate usage, usage of various IT tools, speaking through apps
	Limited responsibility of the administration	Lack of knowledge from management, lack of help from administration, lack of respect from administration, they are not helping, they don't know and don't care
	Difficult communication with parents of refugee children	Difficult to communicate with parents, different cultures, different languages, parents are scared, parents don't want to talk
	Educator – interpreter	Teachers translate themselves, introduce the curriculum to the parents via apps to their mother tongue, translate for children from Lithuanian to their mother tongue
Lived experiences of everyday education	Socialization of foreign language speaking child	Difficult socialization due to different languages, teacher feels responsible for children's socialisation, teachers help children to adapt faster using different methods
	Cultural differences	Cultural differences, different attitudes, different parenting styles, differences in character, different religion and food preferences
	Adaptation of refugee children Quality of education	Lack of training of teachers, hasty decisions by administration, lack of information, lack of guidance from management
	Lack of information about the admission of the child	Unexpected admission of children, children are admitted the next day, lack of information about the child, challenges of admitting children with special needs without prior information
	Working with a child from a war zone	The psychological state of the child, parents' feelings and emotions, children are scared, children crying, children are afraid of planes and sounds, children hiding under desks or sheets
Almighty teacher	Relations with families Frightened parents, language barrier, mistrust, hesitation, fear of the future, fear of possible war in Lithuania	
	Lack of support	Lack of support from the administration, indifference of the education department, lack of information, helplessness
	Inefficiency of administration	Lack of trust in the administration, lack of rules, lack of clarity, hesitation
	Relations with colleagues	Everybody is scared, nobody knows anything, anger, scared of war, tension, stress, lack of community
	Administration Control	Everything is decided by the administration, lack of cooperation, lack of support, warning the day before refugee children are brought to the groups
	Psychological stress caused by war	Fear of possible war in Lithuania, fear of future of Ukraine, sympathy, sadness, stress, panic
	Loneliness	The feeling of loneliness, no one to talk to, lack of help from psychologists, everybody being closed to themselves, isolation
	Burnout	Fatigue, exhaustion, wanting to give up and run away, sleepless nights, surviving the war, feeling sorry for the children, feeling helpless, constant thoughts of the children, not knowing how to help

FIGURE 1  
Core themes, subthemes and initial codes.

## Research ethics

The qualitative interview process can be a very personal and individual process for the subject, so it is important for the researcher to remain neutral, not to judge the research participants and not to engage in discussions. It is also important to avoid questions that traumatize the research participant, but it is worth remaining reflective, responsive and to stimulate the interview process. A qualitative interview reveals not only opinions or feelings, but can also reveal very personal experiences, which is why the researcher must remain as professional as possible during the interview. It is important for the researcher not to influence negatively the interview process. It is also very important to maintain proper focus on the purpose of the interview, as during the interview interference may occur between the researcher and the participant that will divert the researcher from the essential goal – qualitative interviewing to research the chosen subject. The researcher must be professional, but at the same time sensitive to the research participants, because it is possible that the research participants will tell sensitive, negative experiences or painful memories (Gaižauskienė and Valavičienė, 2016).

## Limitations of the study

The researchers have a lot of experience working in foreign countries not only with families of other cultures and their children, but also in educating refugee children who came from the war zone. This could have led to greater attention to the concentration and analysis of certain topics and sub-topics, such as “teachers’ readiness to work with refugee children” or “teacher burnout, manifestations of racism.” On the other hand, the available experience in working with refugee children helped the author of the paper to conduct interviews

more deeply and empathetically and to choose the research method and instrument properly. During the empirical study, 10 teachers who currently work with refugee children in pre-school education establishments were interviewed. During the research, all respondents spoke only about Ukrainian refugee children and the author was not able to find a single respondent who worked with other than Ukrainian refugee children. Finding early childhood education teachers working with refugee children from other war zone countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria, etc.) may have revealed larger and deeper research problems that would have determined the results and conclusions of the study.

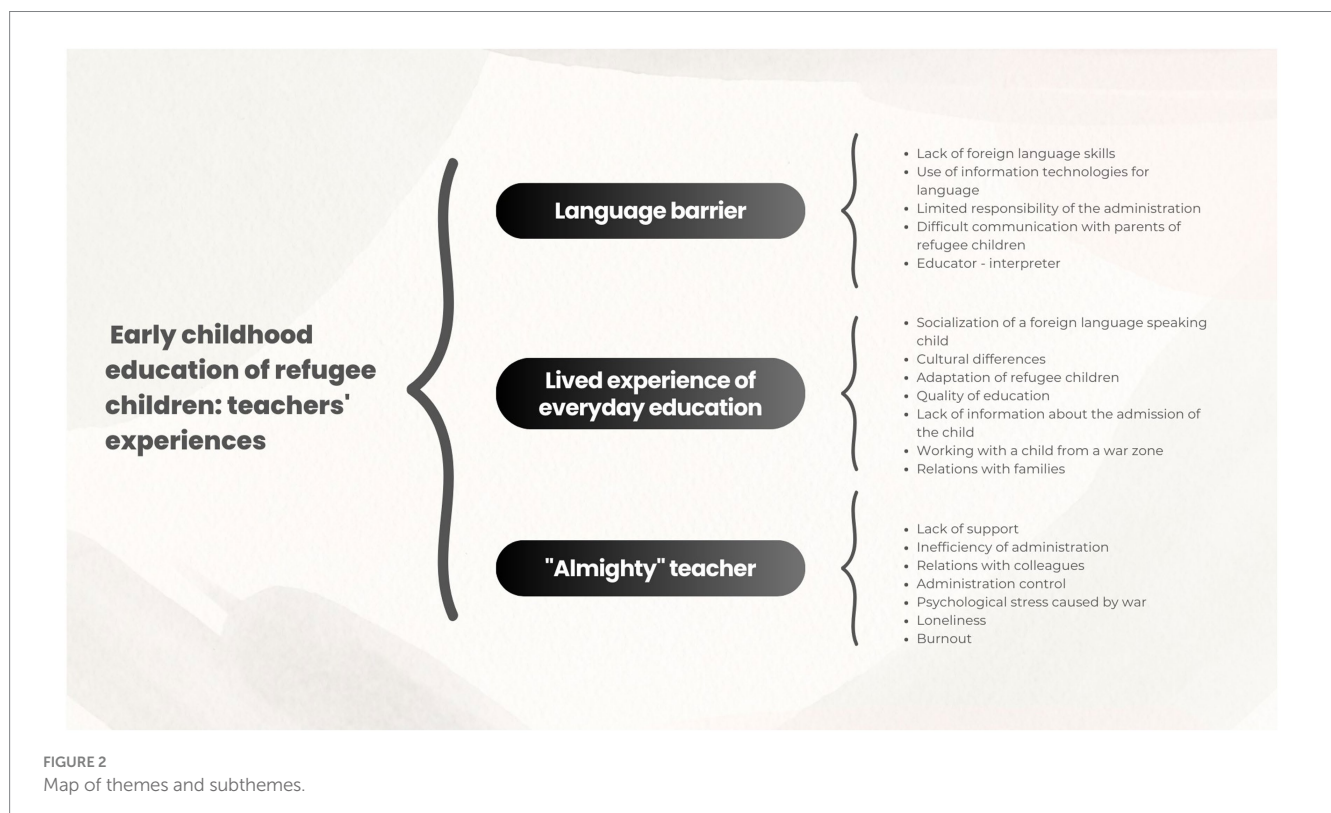
## Results of the study

Ten early childhood and pre-primary education teachers participated in the study. During the analysis of the text, 19 subthemes emerged in the work, which constitute 3 topics: “Language barrier,” “Lived experience of everyday education,” “Almighty” teacher.” By combining these themes, a map of themes and subthemes (see Figure 2) is presented, which corresponds to the results of the study and reveals the experiences of early childhood education teachers in educating refugee children.

Early childhood education of refugee children: teachers’ experiences.

### Theme 1: language barrier

In the first theme, Language barrier, the experiences of preschool teachers in communicating with refugee children and their families are revealed. One of the main challenges is the so-called language barrier. The theme consists of five subthemes: “Lack of foreign



language skills,” “Use of information technologies for language,” “Limited responsibility of the administration,” “Difficult communication with parents of refugee children” and “Educator-interpreter,” which reveal the difficulties faced by the teacher who has to communicate not in their native language.

### Lack of foreign language skills

When teachers are faced with the admission of refugee children to educational institutions and groups, the main problem becomes the lack of foreign language skills or the inability to speak that language. Without learning and understanding the language, the entire process of education and admission becomes significantly more difficult for both teachers and refugee families. Most of the teachers said that one of the most important factors why refugee children were brought to their groups was the knowledge of a foreign language:

*“I remember at the beginning there was even a question of how many teachers there are in the institution who can speak, let us say, Russian, for children to understand. Well, there was another question here, because groups were also created at our place, well, not at our place, but in neighboring kindergartens” (19).*

The lack of foreign language skills in communicating with refugee families is not the only problem that emerged during the work analysis. The educational process itself becomes problematic, when teachers have to find ways to involve refugee children who do not know the Lithuanian language in the educational process and try to ensure quality education:

*“Preparation of those tasks, perhaps of those activities, so that it’s difficult to include it, because I speak Russian, but there are some pedagogical moments, some words, which I do not use in that language, and it’s difficult for me” (14).*

The applicability of existing educational programs becomes even more complicated when communication becomes one of the biggest barriers:

*“If we receive a Ukrainian, Syrian, Afghan, or some other child – we have our own educational program, the assessment system of our achievements, we have our own state language and if we..., the main and it seems probably the real barrier is that language, communication” (18).*

### Use of information technologies for language

Communicating, understanding and being understood is a social need of many people. With the help of verbal language, we are better able to express our thoughts, emotions and feelings. With the use of information technology, there is a risk that the information to be conveyed to refugee families will be inaccurate, as translation tools often misrepresent the meanings of words. On the other hand, without having a common language with refugee families, the use of information technology remains the only available way for teachers to ensure the transfer of the necessary information, but this method of communication requires additional time in the course of the teacher’s work. Due to the existing language barrier, working teachers have to find ways to interact and communicate with refugee families.

Teachers use various tools to help them provide the necessary information faster, in this case – information technology and translation tools:

*“Well, speaking, now it’s such a challenge and tension that you have to think how to say that in Russian, how to express yourself and sometimes it seems... someone asks me, and I understand that question, but I lack words to answer that question. Well, then I need to go to the phone, go to Google translator right away” (11).*

During the research, the teachers revealed that the use of translation tools complicates the work process when communicating with refugee families and takes a lot of time:

*“Well, we figured it out, we talked, but sometimes there is a language barrier. Well, of course, that Google translator means... and it is possible to communicate through the translator...” (13), and they simply forward the translated material to the parents with the help of various apps: “As much as I can, I also translate some information into Russian for them. I send it via messenger or forum” (14).*

The teachers also said that despite the perceived language barrier, various translation apps facilitate the communication process, but this way of communication complicates the daily work routine: *“It seems that you are able to talk to the child, but not to the parents, because you forget what and how to say. Then you are having trouble with that translator again” (19).*

### Limited responsibility of the administration

The results of the research revealed that the administration of the educational establishment failed to provide adequate assistance to teachers in communicating with refugee children and their parents. According to the teachers, the administration did not fulfill its assumed responsibility, even though it was promised:

*“They said they would help, translate and provide a translation tool, but no one helped me, I got to cope myself as best I could and I found a translation app, and we communicated through that app” (15).*

During the research, the administration’s relationship with the teachers and the lack of respect also became apparent. Teachers felt a lack of respect and assistance from the administration of the education establishment when communicating with refugee children and their families, but when admitting children into early childhood education groups, the problem of teachers’ lack of a foreign language was not taken into account:

*“You must, you have to and they do not ask if you know the language or you do not, there was no such conversation” (13).*

### Difficult communication with parents of refugee children

Language is the main source of quality verbal communication to communicate and collaborate with refugee families. In the presence of a language barrier, it becomes difficult to communicate with parents in order to inform them about the child’s daily achievements or existing problems:

*“When talking to parent’s individually about achievements, for example, it is also difficult for me to speak, because I do not know all those terms in Russian. So yes, such cases, where I need more to explain about the achievements, the progress of the child to the parents, that’s the most difficult for me” (I4).*

The absence of a common language becomes a daily obstacle to proper communication with families, so the teachers decide to start learning the language of the refugees themselves in order to have smoother communication and cooperation.

### Educator-interpreter

When refugee children are admitted to educational groups, teachers without planning it become interpreters between families and the administration or between psychologists, special pedagogues, speech therapists and other specialists:

*“Social worker does not speak Russian, it’s complicated, so we communicate only through me, she says something in Lithuanian, then we continue working” (I3).*

Helping parents becomes an integral part of a teacher’s work, because when working with children, one also works with their parents. Parents, teachers, administration and other educational specialists form a circle of support, the center of which is the child. The informant stated that there she has a desire to help and take on the role of interpreter herself, not only in helping children, but also their parents, because she feels sorry for them:

*“I try to help them, always say it in Lithuanian and translate it into Russian so that they understand and always ask if they have understood, and then we can communicate somehow” (I5), and it is not uncommon for a teacher to think about how to help a newly arrived child feel safe in his new environment: “We spoke Russian from the beginning, because I immediately asked him how it was better for him to communicate” (I7).*

Most of the teachers said that whenever there is an opportunity, they try to translate as much information as possible for refugee children in order to ensure that the education is of high quality and equivalent:

*“I have entered the forums of Ukrainian teachers, those accounts, I try from them translate into Lithuanian. I write something to her in Ukrainian and next to it in Lithuanian. And if it’s related to letters, I try something in Lithuanian” (I4).*

When educating and working with refugee families, the teacher unexpectedly takes on additional responsibilities, in this case she becomes an interpreter. Such additional responsibilities imposed on the teacher take a lot of time not only from the children during education, but also from the teachers themselves, who are left to work alone with a large number of children.

Summarizing the first topic, it becomes clear how the language barrier complicates the workflow not only for teachers, but also for refugee families. Research has revealed that knowledge of different foreign languages often helped to communicate with refugee families and refugee children, but those who did not have a common

language faced a huge challenge to discover themselves other methods analogous to verbal communication. When working with refugee families, a teacher has to take on many different responsibilities, not always directly related to the education of early age children. Teachers have the responsibility not only to educate refugee children who do not speak the local language, but also to communicate directly with their families on a daily basis by answering their questions. Without sufficient or no foreign language skills, teachers themselves become responsible for communication between the educational institution and refugee families, without receiving translation services from the educational institution’s administration.

## Theme 2: lived experience of everyday education

The research revealed not only the daily experiences of teachers in educating refugee children, but also revealed sensitive moments of what it means to work with a child who came from a war zone. The second theme consists of seven sub-themes: “Socialization of a foreign language speaking child,” “Cultural differences,” “Adaptation of refugee children,” “Quality of education,” “Lack of information about receiving a child,” “Working with a child from a war zone,” “Relationships with families”.

### Socialization of a foreign language speaking child

When working with children, the teacher assumes responsibility not only for the child’s academic achievements and adaptation in the group, but also for the socialization process, which is a particularly important factor in order to ensure that the child’s education process is of high quality and ensures children’s well-being during education. The teacher must ensure that all children feel good both physically and psychologically during the entire educational process. A child’s socialization becomes much more difficult when the child does not speak the same language as the other children in the group, so the teacher has a great challenge to find ways to help the children make friends:

*“Well, the children know those words, they make friends with her, take her to play” (I3).*

The teachers say that the socialization process takes longer than the adaptation itself, but they also notice that the Lithuanian children themselves find ways to communicate and help the refugee children to socialize and adapt faster in the group:

*“So, children are already trying to say one or another word to her, say to her one word at a time, sometimes those kids even invent their own language to talk to that girl” (I4).*

### Cultural differences

When working with refugee children, the teacher inevitably encounters other cultures, which include not only different languages, religions, attitudes, but also traditions, customs or other manifestations of behavior. For teachers who do not have experience, it can become quite a challenge when they need to quickly admit families from different countries and try to understand cultural differences:



*“I do not know if it is really so, or there is just a stereotype, but they have got such bravery, strength of character, stick to their own opinion, even at such an age, and, well, you need to talk to him very nicely if you want to change that opinion” (I2).*

Informants say that communication with parents seems more complicated and difficult, and cultural differences can be observed in everyday situations, such as bringing the child to the educational group in the morning.

Meeting different cultures often becomes a challenge, especially if it is happening for the first time. The intercultural preparation of teachers when working with representatives of various cultures and the desire to accept and recognize children's otherness become important:

*“Their temperament is perhaps such, we Lithuanians are more Nordic, we are more reserved, and children obviously always have those emotions and they show them, one child more, the other less” (I8), and it is precisely the different types of children's temperaments that become what the teachers distinguish when talking about refugee children: “They stand out for their temperament, for everything, they are, how to say, so expressive, so you can really see that this is not a Lithuanian girl, she is like that” (I7).*

## Adaptation of refugee children

Adaptation or, in other words, adjustment, fitting in can be very different for each child, but all children go through this period in their own way. During this period, children can experience many different emotions, starting with anxiety, fear, panic attacks or extreme stress, because this is the period when the child learns to stay alone – without his family members – for a longer period of time. Appropriate and safe adaptation, during which sufficient time is allocated and the child's needs are taken into account, can ensure a smooth, safe and positive adaptation period, otherwise the adaptation can bring a lot of confusion to both the teachers and the refugee family:

*“For the girl that I mentioned it was difficult to get used to the kindergarten even in Ukraine... and here she used to cry a lot, more often she stayed here until lunch and her mother used to take her then” (I10).*

The topic becomes even more sensitive when we talk about the lack of adaptation for refugee children, because these children who come from a war zone, where they may have experienced a lot of stress leaving not only their native home, but also, in many cases, their fathers, grandfathers, friends or beloved pets. The results of the study showed that the educational establishments lacked time for preparation to ensure a sufficient period of adaptation, and the children were practically left alone the very next day in the new group.

## Quality of education

During the research, the teachers did not hide the fact that general education institutions do not pay enough attention to ensuring the quality education of refugee children:

*“I know that they are not getting the quality education they should be getting” (I4), and the majority highlighted that the large number of children in the group hinders the provision of quality education for refugee children: “When there are many children in the group, less individual education is obtained” (I1).*

The admission of refugee children to educational groups revealed an even bigger problem that teachers faced. The informant claims that when the admission of refugee children into groups began, the norms for the number of children in the groups were exceeded:

*“Children are admitted into groups according to age, and if we are allowed, let us say, to have 20 children, when they admit refugees, the number can be exceeded, there are 21, 22 children” (I3). In this case, the teachers had to work alone with the whole group: “you are alone with 20, 21 children” (I3).*

Many teachers agree that refugee children do not receive quality education, but the teachers themselves try to do everything in their power to provide quality education, even if it is temporary:

*“Again, everything seems temporary here for her. That's why I sometimes think about how to act here, it's actually temporary, but I still want to give her quality education, even though it's temporary”. (I4).*

## Lack of information about receiving a child

One of the most important and most frequently mentioned challenges faced by most teachers is the lack of information about the process of admission of refugee children to an educational institution. Teachers were often left unaware, with no one informing them in advance of the child's age or academic or life skills. The teachers did not have additional information about the child's educational achievements, so in most cases they did not know what to expect until the last day:

*“Well, I do not know much about admission, the managers just bring the child to the group, introduce him and tell him that this child will be in your group, and I somehow have not looked too deep into it, but I know that everything is free of charge for them” (I1).*

Often, teachers were told about the admission of a refugee child to an educational institution a day or a few days before the beginning of the attendance, but without providing advance information.

After surveying the teachers, it became clear that the administration of the educational establishments did not pay enough attention to informing the teachers about the arrival of a new child in their group:

*“Everything is very simple, knock-knock on the door, the management comes and says that you will have such a child, and that's it” (I2), but we can do the assumption that this possibly happened because the administration itself did not receive information in advance and in most cases it was an unexpected situation for the educational establishment itself.*

## Working with a child from a war zone

Working with a child who came from a war zone requires special skills. An important role will be played by the teacher's own psychological preparation, because the teacher can never know what kind of child's behavior or traumas he will encounter during work:

*“The other child was, how can I say it here – somewhat aggressive. He was so angry, as I say, at the whole world and, if he did not like something, he used to walk out the door” (I1).*

Lithuanian teachers have never faced the crisis of war refugees before, so this field of work is new for them and has never been explored before. Teachers, without proper professional knowledge on how to work with refugee children and provide them with a safe environment, often do what they think is best at the time, relying on their intuition rather than professional knowledge:

*“It was completely new to me and I relied on my intuition only” (12).*

Teachers who have to educate refugee children are often faced with children’s psychological traumas, which they have never faced before:

*“A plane flies and she runs to me and it’s like she is afraid of the sounds, they seem so terrible to her, and she runs to me looking for protection” (13).*

Children who come from a war zone are at increased risk of post-traumatic stress syndrome and other psychosocial disorders, which can affect the behavior of refugee children both in the educational establishment and at home. The research participant said that special attention must be paid to refugee children, because the children arrive already with psychological trauma:

*“There definitely were psychological problems, because the mother was also scared, she told me that she did not know how to put her to sleep” (13).*

And in many cases, children in a foreign country, not knowing how to express their feelings and emotions, resort to inappropriate behavior in order to attract the attention of teachers or other adults.

Many children are often very open about their experiences and memories, refugee children are no exception. Children want to share their experiences with teachers, and teachers need to listen to them. Listening and hearing children’s stories can be much more complicated than sharing and telling one’s emotions, because when listening to refugee children’s stories, the teacher is invited to experience refugee children’s experiences, feelings, emotions, fears and other war-related emotions through the stories. The teacher becomes a “sponge” for the emotions and experiences of the refugee children, absorbing the experiences of different children into himself, becomes a witness to their stories:

*“She would run up and start talking about her life, and then you realize how such a small child experienced such horrors, and it will stay, will last a lifetime indeed” (13).*

Teachers hear various emotions and feelings experienced by refugee children during the war, which are shocking:

*“I heard the girl telling that their house was destroyed, that they were hiding, that there was no home anymore”. (13), and the war itself becomes a normal phenomenon for such children.*

## Relationships with families

Teachers have a responsible role not only to inform parents about the child’s day, but also to try to understand the otherness of parents and accept differences:

*“Some parents themselves are not inclined to communicate much and openly about children’s education” (15).*

Teachers not only often witness conflict situations, but also find themselves in the midst of various conflicts. When a refugee child is admitted to the educational group, the teacher reluctantly takes on the responsibility of not only working with the child himself, but also becomes a silent advocate for the parents, helping the family to adapt faster, to get acquainted with local rules and laws. Parents do not always willingly agree to accept new rules or norms and may oppose them, the teacher becomes the person who directly communicates with refugee families on a daily basis:

*“Once I simply did not accept a child, because they brought him at eleven o’clock, after eleven, and asked why he could not stay, I said no, you are registered as absent, no meals have been ordered for him, I cannot admit you, to take half of a meatball from another child to feed your child, this is not allowed here, and it is difficult for them to understand, this is probably the biggest problem here” (15).*

Adult refugees arriving from a war zone often experience stress themselves due to war-related circumstances. Abandoned or collapsed homes, leaving behind parents or other family members such as husbands, brothers or sons over the age of 18, etc., while rescuing their minor children often increases the risk of psychological trauma. Refugee parents are stressed not only because of fleeing from a war zone, but also because they enter a culturally different social society, where they must immediately familiarize themselves with local rules and laws, look for work, housing, take care of food, integrate into a foreign culture and reconcile with a new refugee status. Research participants testified that communicating with refugee parents is not easy, because they are not inclined to talk openly about their and their families past:

*“The mother is also not open, she does not say much about whether she has been visiting some institution, whether she needs or she does not want something” (13), and sometimes a lack of trust in the teacher becomes apparent: “She communicates, I cannot say that she does not, but so reservedly, as if she does not want to talk much about herself but anyway, basically she as a mother does not really communicate so that to come and say, well, teacher, how was my first grader? As I say, she is quite reserved” (16).*

In summary, it can be said that while working with refugee children, early childhood education teachers and people working in the administration encountered various daily situations that complicated the conditions of admission and education of refugee children in educational institutions. The teachers faced not only the differences associated with other cultures, but also had to find ways to properly communicate and interact with the parents of refugee children. The results of the study showed that the teachers made every effort to ensure proper socialization and adaptation of the refugee children, but due to the lack of prior information about the child and his family, it was extremely difficult to do so. During the analysis of the research, the need for the teacher’s psychological resilience skills emerged when refugee children who arrived from the war zone share their experiences from the war. Teachers have a responsible duty not only to educate and ensure quality education during the entire process, but also to become children’s emotional “sponge,” who will not only

listen to children's stories, but also provide daily assistance to ensure children's comprehensive safety.

### Theme 3: "almighty" teacher

Different experiences of teachers are discussed as well as feelings faced by teachers educating refugee children. The teacher becomes the "Almighty" lone soldier on the battlefield who must not only do his job well, but also work on himself and his inner experiences. This theme comprises seven sub-themes: "Lack of support," "Inefficiency of administration," "Relationships with colleagues," "Administrative control," "Psychological stress caused by war," "Loneliness" and "Burnout," which reveal what a teacher goes through when working with refugee children during the process.

#### Lack of support

Research participants said that they felt a lack of help when working and educating refugee children. Often, teachers feel left alone to fate, without any help from the administration of educational establishments:

*"I do not feel any help from the administration. There is no support, no incentives, I'm not talking about monetary incentives, I know that the budget is full of holes and everything else, but simply, sometimes a good word is enough and that's it"* (15).

The research participant stated that receiving help from the administration of the educational institution could ensure a calmer period of waiting and admission of refugee children to educational establishments:

*"If we had received help, I think the process would have been calmer, the waiting and the reception, and knowing what to say, and the teacher's reaction to the child's certain condition, when you know what to expect, and how to react yourself and not get afraid"* (12).

Some teachers felt ashamed of how their establishment had left them alone without any help:

*"For teachers, well, nothing. No help (shrugs). It's even a shame to say that our establishment is like that, or maybe I did not ask, but really"* (13).

The teachers felt left alone in a new situation for them:

*"I'm struggling myself, unless I we'll raise some kind of discussion there, that it's necessary to have some kind of seminar, some kind of training, how to integrate, how to work with those refugees. Because I say it's still really fresh and new for me, so for now I'm struggling as I can"* (11).

The research participants also said that they felt a lack not only of help, but also of professional support:

*"There is a great lack of support from the administration, competent explanations, so that you could ask them all questions, so that you could go and get an answer"* (15) and even felt anger: *"I do not know how many others received help, but in my specific case, what can I say, there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Well, I'm very angry about that"* (12).

During the research, the teachers said that there was a huge lack of help, and there was no information on how to properly work and prepare refugee children:

*"I would really like more information, like actual plans for example. How to prepare him, that child, because I have a preschooler, it is very important to me, in fact, to prepare him for school, but in my case the principal does not know anything, and I have no one to ask. It's really difficult"* (14).

The results of the study revealed that teachers who do not receive help and necessary information are forced to find out on their own how to educate refugee children: *"when you ask, no one knows anything, no one can answer, I have to find out on my own, if I want to interest that child, so that it would be easier for her and she would go to kindergarten with a smile, I have to give my all self"* (14), because the people working in the administration are not interested in the education of refugee children and their problems: *"you know, they are not interested at all. It seems to me that they are not interested at all. Because if they were interested, they would definitely provide help at least to a teacher and that child or would help the parents there. I think parents also need help"* (14).

Another informant stated that she felt a lack of basic human support from the people working in the administration of the educational establishment: *"you want to ask for help and you are not given it, like you hit a wall. You hit one wall, you hit another wall and you think that there really is no respect"* (14).

#### Inefficiency of administration

When studying the experiences of teachers educating and working with refugee children, people working in the administration of educational establishments play a very important role. It is the administration that should feel and be responsible for the proper integration of refugee children, making changes in plans or creation of new plans. It is also the administration's responsibility to ensure the psychological and physical safety not only for employees, but also for children attending educational institutions, as well as the comprehensive development of refugee children. The results of the research showed that the administration was generally not interested in the education of refugee children:

*"You know, the management is not even interested, they do not even ask how things are going or if we need help. Do not even ask. When I come with some request, they tell me that I always need everything"* (14).

Not only refugee children did not receive the attention of the administration, but also the teachers who worked with them:

*"There is no attention from the administration to what you are doing or if you need help. At least they could ask if I need some help, maybe I cannot cope, maybe I cannot find some educational material, that's what I miss"* (13).

Some teachers did not hesitate to criticize the heads of early childhood education establishments, stating that they are not interested in providing the necessary help:

*“I do not know if she is not interested or if she does not want to, as when I ask her some questions, she just does not want to give me help” (I4).*

The results of the study showed that teachers felt a lack of help not only from the administrative staff of their educational establishments, but also from education departments or higher authorities, and according to the teachers, more attention was paid to schools, while pre-school education establishments were left to find a solution for working with refugee children on their own:

### Relationships with colleagues

Being a teacher means always being surrounded by different people: parents, children, colleagues. Teachers want to be supported and encouraged in their work, to be praised with a kind word, to be respected. The results of the study showed that some teachers said they felt very separated from their colleagues, they felt lonely and misunderstood, there was no one to share their experiences and concerns with when working with refugee children:

*“And that feeling of loneliness, because colleagues actually work, but they, at least like that one colleague who works with a Ukrainian child, she is not interested in how to integrate him there, how to include him, she is not interested in it” (I4).*

The research participants said that they feel lonely in the work environment due to strained relationships with colleagues:

*“I do not feel any help from my colleagues, only constant pressure, constant mobbing, because after all, I study and I’m in my last year and there’s no help” (I5).* The teacher said that she was told not to “stand out” when working with refugee children: *“in the spring, I also wanted to ask for an education session to be admitted, they just did not allow me. They said that I would not stand out” (I4).*

The study also showed that the teachers themselves have very different views on the education of refugee children and that not everyone values the importance of quality education in the same way.

### Administrative control

During the research, it became clear that the administration is not always willing to help teachers and even vice versa – sometimes teachers even feel afraid to ask for help, because they fear for their further career:

*“Nothing can ever be wrong with us, so everything is good, everything is fine with us, and if you say that something is wrong, then maybe something is wrong with you, it does not look nice” (I2).*

The research participant claims that there were indignant teachers in the educational institution who did not want to educate refugee children in their groups for various reasons, but were afraid to oppose the administration:

*“There were also indignant ones, because they threw us in this without any preparation, neither psychological nor social, it’s just that a child like this will come to the group today, you have to be there and communicate and talk... we did not even have a choice, we did not even dare to object” (I3)* and associated her behavior with the education of her generation: *“I am from that generation*

*of teachers who do what they are told to, so if management says, we do without raising questions” (I6).*

The informant said that even in order to organize an intercultural event, it is necessary to ask the administration and obtain permission for such an event, because if the teacher did it arbitrarily, she might face problems later.

### Psychological stress caused by war

Often the countries of the European Union receiving refugees are located far away from the war zone and do not have close cultural or religious similarities. In this case, it is easier for people to work without seeing, knowing or hearing what is happening in the war zone, detaching themselves from emotional experiences. For the teachers, this period was very stressful, and they could not work calmly:

*“When the war started, it actually hindered our work. Because there was such a shock and such a desire to constantly follow the news” (I1),* and the feelings caused by the war made the teachers feel emotionally weak: *“because I’m very wholeheartedly for Ukraine, I might say that it was overwhelming for me, I was afraid to go to work, I thought I would start crying, I would melt emotionally. I was so sorry, I think I could give away anything, I just wasn’t emotionally strong (I8).*

The research showed that the anxiety and different emotions related to the war in Ukraine still cause different feelings for teachers and it is still a sensitive topic for them: *“colleagues and the administration, all of us, reacted sensitively at that time and still react, war is war” (I6).*

### Loneliness

The results of the research revealed that the situation caused various feelings, but the most prominent was the feeling of loneliness, which often caused anger:

*“For education, I feel very bad, because we have to talk, we have to get help, the managers and the entire educational establishment has to help the teachers, not throw them in it and leave to cope on their own, but the worst thing is that they are still expecting some kind of results, but then help me to get those results somehow Well, I was very angry indeed, and we talked about it with my colleague who works in the same group, it’s really difficult, how should I behave. Well, let us say I was still interested, well, the other one would surely say why I have to do this, I do not care, we have the educational program, and we educate children accordingly. How should I act? Well, the teachers are different, that’s what I’m saying here again, it’s very difficult because of that” (I9),* and most of the informants said that during the whole process they felt lonely and not interesting for anyone: *“Actually, after the last few years, when I had that the case of diabetes, and those Ukrainians were thrown in like that and no one cared about how you feel or how you would work” (I5).*

The research participant compared her teaching profession to ships trying to sail through storms:

*“Maybe it’s different in other establishments, but in ours we sail like ships, trying to withstand storms by ourselves” (I2).*



Teachers not only feel left alone to deal with their difficult emotional state, but also do not feel togetherness and help during the educational process:

*“As a teacher, I am alone, and there is also an assistant, but she also does her work. She needs to clean up, wash the floor, dishes, and so on. The education process is still on me, unless we are doing some handicrafts, then I am asking for help in one or another situation. But anyway, in practice, all education is on one teacher” (I1).*

The teacher feels alone: “left on the ice, you are completely alone, and you can cope as you want” (I4), and another research participant said that the researcher was the first to ask how the teacher felt during this entire period:

*“Emotions were probably in the last place. But wow, you are the first to ask such a question” (I3).*

The teachers felt lonely and even thought about changing their profession:

*“Yes, I’m alone. This loneliness makes it very difficult to provide help to her, to those children, and to others. I then thought – what am I doing here at all, is this my sphere at all. Well, if your needs are completely ignored by the administration, nobody is interested in you” (I4).*

Loneliness and the lack of fellowship in educational institutions were what the teachers faced during the admission and education of refugee children:

*“We should probably have been given more of those seminars, some kind of material, because it really was a difficult beginning. Now I can already say that, but then it was really very difficult, and no one helped. You somehow had to cope with those kids in a group” (I9).*

## Burnout

Most of the teachers felt burnout from work, and the stressful situation at work made them even more exhausted. The teachers’ experiences at work in educating refugee children caused not only emotional exhaustion for the teachers, but also worsened their psychological well-being. Feelings of inferiority, burnout or lack of motivation at work in educating refugee children made teachers think about changing their profession or leaving their jobs, but even when experiencing these feelings, teachers did not receive the necessary help. The research participants said that they felt the first symptoms of burnout, but they had no one to talk to about it:

*“I felt bad, really, I wish there was someone to talk to at that moment, then oooo, it was quite a challenge” (I3).*

The teacher says that she feels that she is already burnt out due to the situation with the refugee children:

*“I look at every child as at my own child, I sympathize with them, and I used to help Ukrainian children too, and now I see them and*

*I just want to take care of them, and I think that maybe I’m too emotionally weak to work as a teacher or it just takes time, maybe I’ll get mor resilient” (I5).*

The research participant said that she felt that the administration also had an influence on her burnout:

*“I sit down on the ground again, they clip my wings, and after a while all thoughts settle down again and I still try to get up. I somehow thought that it would be a shame to leave and throw everything away. But I already had such thoughts. I feel that the motivation is gone” (I4).*

The increased workload was also one of the reasons why the teacher felt the symptoms of burnout syndrome:

The research participant said that the whole situation with the education of refugee children and relations with others harmed her self-esteem.

The results of the study revealed that teachers have many different responsibilities and work roles that they perform in the education of refugee children. When working with refugee children, teachers are faced with loneliness, which manifest itself not only in relationships with colleagues and others, but also with themselves. The teacher experiences different feelings when he/she feels left alone without help, in a completely new situation. It is in such moments that the teacher’s personal character and his inner strength are manifested. The teacher becomes responsible not only for his/her own well-being, but also bears responsibility for the children, who also need help. The feeling of loneliness is personal, and it is not bad or good by itself, because it is an experience that gives the teacher a kind of freedom to look at the situation differently and discover his inner strength to act. Early age education teachers face different manifestations of loneliness, when loneliness is felt when being with others: colleagues, refugee children and their families, colleagues working in the administration. This makes the work process of teachers even more difficult, because in the absence of help and support from others, the teacher has to take responsibility for protecting refugee children and at the same time help himself. If the teacher is not given the help they need in time, teachers experience not only daily stress and psychological tension, but also the risk of burnout.

## Discussion

According to UNHCR Key displacement and solutions trends in the first half of 2024 data, at the end of June 2024, the global refugee population reached 43.7 million, an increase of 1 per cent from the end of 2023. This number includes 15.3 million children refugees under UNHCR mandate and other children in need of international protection (Unicef Data: Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women, 2024). These figures show that the number of refugees, including children, is growing and countries need to find long-term solutions not only to welcome, integrate and help refugees to socialize in their new country, but also to find ways to ensure that refugee children receive an appropriate and high-quality education.

The education of refugee children is not a new issue globally, but it is a relatively uncharted area in Lithuania. This situation marks the

first time that the Lithuanian state has had to accommodate a significant number of refugee children within its educational institutions. Consequently, the lack of experience and knowledge in this area has led to various barriers to education. As is the case worldwide, refugee children in Lithuania possess both a legal and a moral right to education. Many countries face challenges in their national education systems due to large influxes of refugees; however, there remains a tendency to view these flows as isolated incidents rather than as integral parts of global dynamics. Education systems must respond responsibly to these changes in order to create stable conditions for providing quality education to refugee children. As a result, a gap is developing between the legal right of refugee children to education and its practical implementation. Access to national education systems for refugee children is increasingly becoming part of the problem rather than merely a solution to the challenges posed by deterritorialization and the cosmopolitan nature of refugee flows (Rönström and Roth, 2024).

The results of the study revealed that teachers working with refugee children face different situations every day that are completely new to them, and the education of a refugee child seems to be a new and never-before-studied phenomenon for the teacher. The refugee child and immigrant or foreigner are not similar concepts. The education of refugee children covers many areas, and the teacher faces different social and psychological situations: cultural differences, adaptation, socialization, psychological state of children after coming from the war zone. The teacher becomes responsible for the process of adaptation and socialization of refugee children and ensuring the daily needs of their families (Cerna, 2019; Gagné et al., 2017).

In order to ensure equal opportunities for educational achievements and inclusive education of refugee children, it is first of all necessary to assess not only the knowledge of the child's native language, but also the teacher's ability to communicate with refugee children. The results of the study revealed that, due to the lack of knowledge of foreign languages, it was difficult for teachers to communicate not only with refugee children, but also with their parents. In countries like Sweden, the host educational establishments not only offer special preparatory classes, but also try to ensure that such classes are staffed by teachers who speak different languages, who will not only more easily meet the diverse needs of the child but will also speed up the child's learning of the national language and help children adapt to the new environment more easily by making friends, learning local culture, language or traditions (Popov and Erik, 2015).

An early childhood education teacher who educates refugee children becomes "Almighty" because she is all alone in the process of educating refugee children, and the lack of necessary help becomes a daily norm. The research showed that teachers face not only a lack of help from other professionals when admitting and educating refugee children or a lack of communication with colleagues, but the most important thing that the research results revealed is that the teacher faces different feelings and internal experiences, such as loneliness, burnout or war induced psychological tension. The teacher feels alone, abandoned, not needed by anyone in the process of education. Informants testify that they feel left alone because the administration is unable or unwilling to listen to the teachers' request for help, and in some cases the teachers themselves are afraid to ask for help due to strained relations between colleagues at the workplace. The teacher says: "I am all alone, I am on my own, like a boat in the ocean". In the

absence of external help in the form of psychological or social support, teachers often face various psychological problems such as burnout, fatigue and stress (Karkouti et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

- 1 The results of the study revealed that the lack of a common language is one of the biggest challenges in admitting refugee children and their families to early childhood education establishments. Due to the lack of a common language and the lack of prior preparation of the administration of educational institutions to admission of refugee families, teachers are left to think on their own how to provide general information to such families. The teachers try to use various information technologies in order to transfer at least some information to the parents, which would facilitate their stay in the host country.
- 2 During the research, it was identified that teachers face different challenges every day when educating and working with refugee children. Cultural differences, peculiarities of the socialization of a foreign-speaking child, lack of information about the admission and education of refugee children, and the lack of preparation for working with a child who has just arrived from a war zone are some of the main challenges faced by teachers who work and educate newly arrived refugee children.
- 3 Teachers of educational institutions often lacked help not only from their colleagues or the administration of the educational institution, but it was also revealed that no information was provided on time either from the education departments of the cities or from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. When the admission of refugee children to educational institutions in Lithuania started, teachers were not provided with any necessary information that could have helped them properly prepare for the admission of such children to early childhood education establishments. When the process of admitting refugee children into educational institutions began and there was a lack of at least minimal information on how to properly and qualitatively educate children, teachers not only collected information from various sources, but this made them feel lonely, having to find out and search on their own for information, how to work properly with refugee children.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## Ethics statement

The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Board of Ethics of the Educational Research Institute, Education Academy, Vytautas Magnus University. Research participant recruitment and their decisions to participate in the

interview did not involve issues related to social, moral, cultural and/or political aspects, and there was no reimbursement for participants' time and expenses as all the interviews were conducted on-line. There were no ethical conflicts because the research team allowed freedom of choice regarding participation in the study. The research team ensured that participants were provided with an informed consent prior sheet, which provided information about study aims and procedures, the nature of teachers' recruitment for participation in the study, and the assurance of participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

## Author contributions

SL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VJ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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