

## Article

# The Relational Refugee Child: Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Approaches to Educational Inclusion

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**Abstract:** This article explores the concept of the Relational Refugee Child (RRC), emphasising the importance of trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches in fostering refugee students' educational and social integration. Refugee children often navigate multifaceted layers of disconnection resulting from cultural, linguistic, and spatial barriers, which challenge their sense of belonging and participation in educational systems. Drawing on a qualitative study with sub-Saharan refugee students and their teachers in Algerian national schools, this article critically explores the relational dimensions of refugee education. It highlights how systemic factors such as language policies and perceptions around integration shape refugee students' experiences. The study contends that trauma-informed practices, which centre the refugee child, are crucial in addressing the psychological and social burdens of displacement. Simultaneously, culturally and linguistically inclusive pedagogies that actively challenge the marginalisation of "low-prestige" cultures and languages may offer transformative potential by validating refugee students' identities, fostering meaningful connections, and enhancing their sense of agency. These approaches counter the dominance of monolingual ideologies and recognise the profound cultural and motivational significance of minority languages and cultures. By situating refugee education within the broader framework of relational inclusion, this article advocates for an integrative approach that merges trauma-informed strategies with inclusive methodologies.



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**Keywords:** relational refugee child; linguistic inclusivity; cultural identity; inclusion; educational integration; trauma-informed pedagogies

## 1. Introduction

As of 2024, children constituted approximately 40% of the global forcibly displaced population, with millions experiencing disrupted education (UNHCR, 2024). The increasing number of refugee children worldwide necessitates a critical re-evaluation of educational integration practices in host countries (Tumen et al., 2025). Many refugee children face linguistic, cultural, and systemic barriers when integrating into new educational and social contexts. These barriers often limit their participation and lead to marginalisation, a multi-dimensional process involving visible, personal, and structural exclusion (Messiou, 2006; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018). Such challenges are compounded by traditional classroom environments, where rigid structures and standardised expectations can inadvertently marginalise students who do not conform to dominant norms (Keddie, 2012; Stim, 2024). Educational spaces may reinforce societal power imbalances through spatial arrangements, teacher–student interactions, and peer dynamics (Liscio & Farrelly, 2019).

Addressing these structural inequities requires more than policy rhetoric; it calls for inclusive models that move beyond access to dismantle systemic barriers to meaningful participation (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018). Inclusive education, at its core, transforms exclusionary practices to promote equity for all learners, including refugees (Ainscow, 2005). However, in developing countries, factors such as limited resources, linguistic diversity, and sociocultural complexity complicate implementation. Scholars increasingly critique one-size-fits-all approaches, which often result in symbolic rather than substantive inclusion (Slee, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017).

To address these concerns, this article explores the role of trauma-informed and culturally responsive educational practices in shaping refugee children's relational experiences within Algerian national schools. Accordingly, this article attempts to answer the following research question: In what ways do trauma-informed and culturally responsive educational practices shape the relational experiences of refugee children in Algerian national schools, and how do these practices influence their sense of belonging and inclusion? The article identifies four intersecting dimensions of relational exclusion: spatial marginalisation, peer negotiation of cultural norms, linguistic anxiety, and pedagogical spatiality.

## 2. Context

Algeria currently hosts approximately 73,600 Sahrawi refugees from Western Sahara, in addition to around 12,500 refugees and asylum seekers from a range of countries, many of whom originate from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Chad, Mali, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNHCR, 2025). The country serves as both a destination and a transit point for individuals fleeing conflict in neighbouring regions, further diversifying its refugee and asylum-seeking population (UNHCR, 2021).

Algeria's approach to refugee education is characterised by what Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes as a "colour-blind" policy, where all students are believed to be treated equally regardless of their backgrounds. While this approach may appear neutral, it risks fostering institutional conditions that lead to what Dakhli et al. (2024) term "passive exclusion"; a condition in which refugee children are formally entitled to education but face significant, often insurmountable, obstacles to meaningful participation. Sub-Saharan refugees further face entrenched structural barriers, including social marginalisation and economic instability (Planes-Boissac et al., 2008; Trabelsi & Ben Dridi, 2024).

Within this complex context, this study focuses on an Algerian national school in Algiers that enrolls both Algerian students and Sub-Saharan refugee children. The school operates within a Francophone education system, and a non-governmental organisation (NGO), referred to as Icosium<sup>1</sup>, plays a crucial role in facilitating refugee enrolment, providing educational materials, and offering psychosocial support. However, Algeria does not have yet a formal integration policy for refugee students, leaving enrolment decisions largely at the discretion of individual school administrators and NGOs. As a result, access to education remains highly inconsistent, with some schools informally accepting refugee students, while others enforce documentation requirements that many displaced families cannot meet.

## 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

International frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees and Education 2030 position education as a fundamental right and tool for social integration (UNESCO, 2016; Betts, 2018). While national integration policies are promoted, refugee students often experience "inclusion without belonging", remaining socially and academically marginalised (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; de Wal Pastoor, 2015). In response, scholars advocate equity-driven models that reject assimilationist paradigms in favour of identity-affirming pedagogies

(Terrell, 2019). Recent critiques expose further systemic failures: refugee students are often treated as temporary “guests” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2025), multilingualism is framed as a deficit (Weidl, 2022; Morali & Manoli, 2024), and trauma-related needs are poorly addressed in schools (Nouraldeen, 2025). To explore these intersecting challenges, this article draws on three complementary frameworks, trauma-informed pedagogy, symbolic violence, and ecological systems theory, that together illuminate the relational and systemic dimensions of refugee children’s educational inclusion.

### 3.1. Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Approaches

Trauma-informed approaches can mitigate disruption, enhance engagement, and affirm identity (Grimes, 2020; Morrison, 2022). They emphasise the importance of recognising refugee students’ cultural identities, languages and lived experiences (Busch, 2015) within educational settings. Rather than adopting colour-blind or assimilationist models, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching views multilingualism and multicultural knowledge as educational assets (García & Wei, 2013; Gay, 2018; Weidl, 2022). Similarly, Canagarajah (2012) and Alcott et al. (2024) highlight translanguaging practices as a strategic negotiation in multilingual contexts, while other scholarship underscores the value of resisting rigid monolingual constraints that can distort meaning and restrict self-expression (Rolland et al., 2023). Language is also integral to how trauma is both experienced and mitigated (Busch & McNamara, 2020), as negative or forced linguistic experiences may reactivate trauma, whereas flexible, inclusive approaches can create safer avenues for self-expression. Recognising that refugee children may be unable to convey their experiences in a single dominant language further underscores the importance of embracing multiple forms of narration.

Translating these ideals into practice can prove difficult. Rigid assessments and political resistance often reduce trauma-informed and culturally responsive strategies to token gestures, failing to address deeper structural inequalities (Paris & Alim, 2017). While these strategies aim to create safe, nurturing environments for refugee learners (Tweedie et al., 2017), they can overlook cultural and linguistic dimensions unless deliberately combined with responsive methods (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). A holistic model that merges both frameworks fosters deeper engagement by validating students’ identities and offering creative, participatory avenues for learning and healing (Ritblatt & Hokoda, 2022). Such inclusive approaches ultimately empower refugee learners as co-constructors of knowledge, supporting their long-term educational and emotional development.

### 3.2. Bourdieu’s Concept of Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) provides another critical lens for understanding how structural inequalities are subtly reproduced in educational settings through the imposition of dominant cultural norms that marginalise minority groups. In refugee education, this manifests in language hierarchies, curricular biases, and institutional routines that privilege dominant identities while devaluing the cultural and linguistic assets of refugee learners. Such exclusion is sustained through everyday interactions between educators, peers, and students (Reay, 2010), and is often normalised as a natural outcome of schooling rather than a reflection of systemic inequity (Dumenden, 2012). Bourdieu’s framework urges educators and policymakers to interrogate these structures and reimagine schools as spaces of cultural affirmation rather than assimilation. However, critiques of Bourdieu highlight a limited attention to agency and resistance (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2022; Thomson & Hall, 2022). Refugee learners actively negotiate and reshape dominant norms through transnational networks, multilingual repertoires, and culturally grounded resilience (Arnot & Pinson, 2005), requiring a more nuanced application

of Bourdieu's theory that foregrounds identity, aspiration, and resistance over deficit-based narratives (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

### 3.3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how refugee children's educational trajectories are shaped by multilayered systems, from peer and teacher relationships (microsystem) to societal and cultural forces (macrosystem). Later refinements emphasise "proximal processes", or dynamic interactions that shape development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In refugee education, these systems can either enable belonging or reinforce marginalisation (de Wal Pastoor, 2015), with schools occupying a pivotal mesosystem role, capable of fostering inclusion through culturally responsive practices or reinforcing exclusion via assimilationist norms (Bartlett et al., 2017). Exosystem-level barriers, such as inadequate community resources and exclusionary policies, further compound this disadvantage (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). However, critiques argue that the model, developed in contexts characterised by relative socio-political stability and established welfare infrastructures, assumes stable ecologies and insufficiently accounts for displacement-related instability (Kaukko et al., 2022). In response, scholars advocate for perspectives grounded in historically marginalised and underrepresented contexts, alongside participatory methodologies that centre refugee learners' voices (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2023), highlighting agency and the role of children as active meaning-makers. By integrating relational theories of childhood with structural critique, refugee education can move beyond deficit-based narratives to recognise how systemic inequities and everyday interactions shape learning and belonging, and how refugee children actively resist and transform these conditions.

## 4. Methodology

This article draws on data generated as part of a broader doctoral study examining the relational and structural dimensions of refugee inclusion within Algerian national schools (Boukhari, 2023). The study employed a qualitative research design across two phases to explore refugee children's lived educational experiences. Phase one aimed to identify structural and relational challenges through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and detailed fieldnotes. Over three months, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with key adult stakeholders: two representatives from the Icosium NGO, two schoolteachers, one headteacher, and one consultant. Participants were purposively selected due to their direct involvement in refugee education, with access facilitated by Icosium. Interviews were designed to provide in-depth insights into systemic issues impacting refugee children's educational integration. Two English classrooms were observed twice weekly for twelve weeks, capturing student-teacher interactions, peer dynamics, and seating patterns. Observations occurred at varied intervals to account for shifts in classroom rhythm and student engagement (Hardman & Hardman, 2017), complementing interview data by revealing relational dynamics not readily captured through verbal accounts. Additionally, relevant institutional documents were analysed to contextualise findings.

A thematic analysis of phase one data was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis framework. This involved the following steps: (1) data familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, observation fieldnotes, and documents; (2) generating initial codes systematically and reflexively; (3) active development of initial themes through interpretative engagement with coded data; (4) iterative reviewing and refining of these themes to ensure they captured shared patterns of meaning around central concepts; (5) defining and naming final themes clearly and cohesively; and (6) producing

a coherent analytical narrative to link structural and relational factors. Both deductive (e.g., integration barriers from (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018)) and inductive approaches informed the coding process.

Phase two foregrounded children's voices using arts-based methods, detailed field-notes, and reflexive conversations with teachers post-workshops. This phase involved 26 Sub-Saharan refugee children aged 10–14, recruited through Icosium and the school administration. Arts-based workshops incorporating drawing, storytelling, and collaging provided culturally sensitive, non-verbal modes of expression. These participatory methods aligned with Leavy's (2015) conceptualisation of creative practice as a transformative research tool that fosters psychological safety and expressive freedom among marginalised groups, reducing linguistic barriers and highlighting children's agency (Vecchio et al., 2020). Such methods are especially relevant to trauma-informed research (Lenette, 2019; de Smet et al., 2024), as they promote emotional resilience, cultural inclusion, and peer connection (McLeod et al., 2020). Reflexive conversations conducted after each workshop with teachers provided additional layers of interpretation, ensuring ongoing reflexivity and contextual grounding in the analysis process. The analysis in phase two employed a thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), explicitly guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles for interpretive and reflexive engagement with qualitative data. This narrative approach was also informed by Bruner's (1991) narrative framework, which emphasises the agency children demonstrated in their storytelling. Interpretations of drawings, collages, and verbal comments were analysed for both thematic content and narrative structure, revealing patterns related to identity, connection, and belonging.

#### 4.1. Multilingual Data Collection

Algeria's sociopolitical context and language policies necessitated a multilingual research design attentive to the politicised nature of language (Heller, 2006). Linguistic choices in research often reflect ideological structures, influencing power dynamics and participant agency (Rolland et al., 2023). In this research, participants could shift freely between languages and dialects, which often included Darja (Algerian Arabic), Standard Arabic, and French. This study prioritised participants' linguistic realities to enable more accurate and ethical representation. Translation was guided by a rigorous protocol involving ongoing cross-checking. Reflexivity in translation choices addressed power imbalances stemming from the researcher's linguistic background.

Researching with refugee children posed additional challenges given systemic inequities in language acquisition (Blommaert & Dong, 2010). In the first phase, difficulties with French grammar and academic discourse were evident across observations, institutional documents, and stakeholder accounts, highlighting the risk of exclusion under dominant-language norms (Rolland et al., 2023). To mitigate this, the study incorporated arts-based workshops as non-verbal, participatory methods, widely endorsed in refugee research for accessing insights beyond language (Wager et al., 2017; Lenette, 2019; Hiebert & Bragg, 2020). By integrating translanguaging practices, multimodal expression, and reflexive translation, the study challenges monolingual bias and centres participants' lived experiences (Busch, 2015). This approach responds to broader calls for ethical, inclusive research with linguistically diverse populations (Weidl, 2022).

#### 4.2. Ethical Consideration in Research with Refugee Children

Given the vulnerability of refugee children, this study prioritised a safe and inclusive approach. Informed consent and assent procedures were adapted to participants' linguistic and cultural contexts (Araiza, 2021; Somo, 2024). Guardians consented via Icosium, and children's assent was revisited at each workshop to uphold autonomy and the right to

withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through pseudonyms and strict data protection, in line with trauma-informed ethics that emphasise trust and privacy (BERA, 2020). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bath, with additional permissions from school administrators and teachers.

The design incorporated trauma-sensitive and arts-based activities to encourage expression and avoid re-traumatisation (Diab & Al-Azzeh, 2024). Collaboration with Icosium staff and teachers supported cultural responsiveness and ongoing safeguarding (Gerson et al., 2024). Translanguaging and culturally adaptive methods helped reduce linguistic barriers and promoted inclusive participation (Lenette, 2019; Pavarini et al., 2021). A teacher was present during all workshops in a non-intrusive, supportive role, as per school protocols. Reflexivity was embedded through a research journal documenting ethical dilemmas and responsive adaptations centred on children's well-being. Aligned with BERA (2020) guidelines, the approach ensured voluntary participation and protection from harm. This trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and participant-centred design upheld refugee children's dignity and agency, enhancing both ethical rigour and research quality (Araiza, 2021; Shankley et al., 2023).

#### *4.3. Researcher Positionality: Balancing Familiarity and Distance*

As an Algerian researcher originally from the eastern region and affiliated with a UK institution, my dual positionality placed me simultaneously as both insider and outsider within this research context. My familiarity with Algeria's national education structures and cultural norms granted me insider knowledge; however, regional, linguistic, and institutional differences also marked me as an outsider, shaping participant perceptions, interactions, and levels of openness during fieldwork. Throughout data collection, my identity was fluid. Some adult participants initially interacted with me formally due to my institutional affiliation, whereas refugee children gradually exhibited greater ease during the arts-based creative sessions. To mitigate power asymmetries, I consciously avoided authoritative roles, instead fostering collaborative and supportive environments that encouraged open expression among the children.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance on reflexivity, I acknowledge my active role in shaping the research process, particularly in data collection, theme generation, and interpretation. Recognising inherent power dynamics when researching with refugee children, I maintained a reflexive journal documenting ethical considerations, emotional labour, and shifts in participant rapport. These reflections informed methodological adaptations, such as incorporating unstructured time whenever children hesitated or exhibited discomfort. Regularly reflecting on how my identity, language use, and research objectives influenced the co-production of knowledge informed crucial methodological decisions, including adopting translanguaging practices and flexible, participatory formats. Rather than striving for neutrality, I tried to embrace the complexities of my positionality, actively and reflexively navigating between familiarity and distance throughout the research.

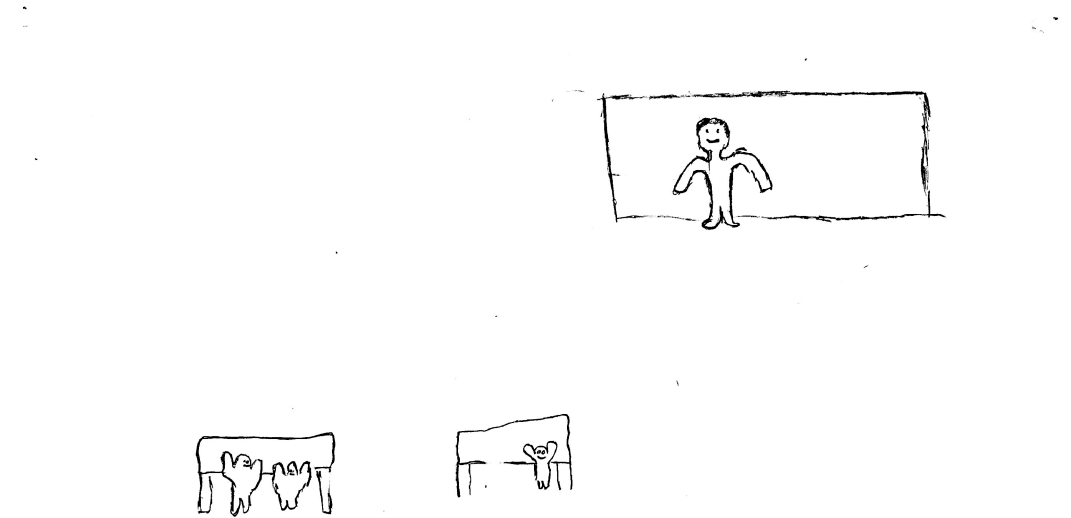
## **5. Findings**

This section explores how refugee children experience and negotiate relational integration within their school environment. Their narratives, drawings, and classroom interactions reveal how spatial positioning, peer relationships, language use, and classroom structures shape their sense of belonging. These findings highlight some of the complexities of social inclusion and exclusion, demonstrating that integration is not merely about physical presence but also about the interpersonal dynamics and institutional practices that influence refugee children's everyday experiences.

### 5.1. Spatial Relational Integration Through Sami's Lens

Sami, a young Congolese refugee, provides a poignant narrative that vividly illustrates the complex relational dynamics he experiences within his classroom. His narrative is encapsulated in a drawing of his classroom, which he described in detail when he was explaining it.

The drawing in Figure 1 (Boukhari, 2023), accompanied by Sami's remark, "I am not there! I don't sit there; I sit here at the back", serve as a personal illustration of the marginalisation experienced by refugee children within educational settings. Despite assertions by teachers that there is no fixed seating plan and that students may choose their own seats, consistent observations reveal a prevalent pattern: refugee students often position themselves at the back of the classroom. In some cases, they actively rearranged the furniture to create this distance, reinforcing both physical and social separation from their peers. Although the school adopts a colour-blind policy and promotes student agency in seating choices, these measures inadvertently sustain the exclusion of refugee children by assuming that autonomy alone facilitates integration.



**Figure 1.** Sami's relational illustration of his classroom, teacher and peers.

Classroom observations substantiate Sami's narrative, revealing that teachers predominantly engage with non-refugee students seated in the front rows while offering limited interaction with refugee learners. One teacher remarked, "They [refugee students] have a choice, but they choose to sit together! In all classes! They sit next to each other" (T2), suggesting a perception that seating arrangements are entirely student-driven. Another commented, "They sit together at the back, not because we tell them to, but because it just happens" (T1), reflecting a passive acceptance of this segregation. Further emphasising this issue, a teacher observed, "Sometimes, my class is empty, and they literally move the tables and chairs to the back. . . it is really hard on them" (T1). A particularly concerning perspective was shared by the Icosium adviser, who noted, "Sometimes they complain about their teachers and accuse them of racism when they are punished. . . they say, 'He did this because I am a refugee, because I am Black'".

Some educators attempt to mitigate these issues, as illustrated by a school counsellor's account: "For instance, sometimes outside the class and when all children are playing, I find Algerian students, for instance, playing football alone, so I take the ball and give it to a refugee child. . . and tell them, 'Let him play even if he just runs'".

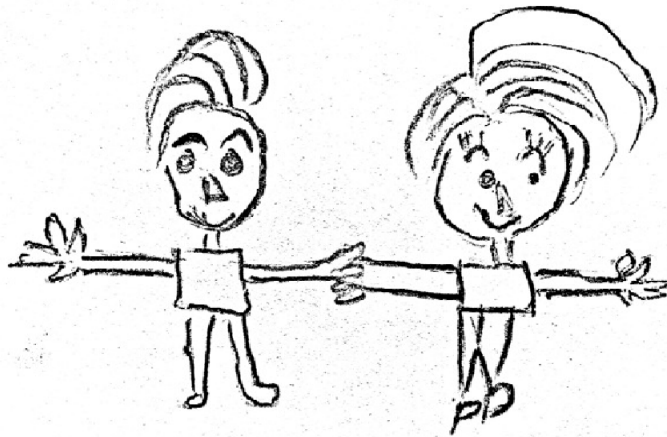
### 5.2. Peer Relationships: Cultural and Religious Nuances

This section examines the complexities of peer relationships among refugee children, as expressed through their drawings and narratives. The images below provide a striking representation of these dynamics, shedding light on the interplay between cultural, religious, and relational values. Children's drawings and narratives in this study reveal the layered complexities of peer relationships among refugee and non-refugee students. For example, Mia's drawing in Figure 2 (Boukhari, 2023) illustrates peace through the lens of friendship, depicting a boy and girl with visibly extended arms embracing. She explained this as reflecting religious norms discouraging physical contact between genders, emphasising the influence of cultural and religious frameworks on relational expressions. In contrast, Aliya's drawing, presented in Figure 3 (Boukhari, 2023), portrays a close, intimate hug between herself and her friend Amadou, exploring friendships that thrive in environments conducive to social and emotional connection. These contrasting depictions underscore the dual role of cultural and religious values as both facilitators and barriers in shaping peer interactions. Together, these drawings illustrate the ways children navigate and reinterpret cultural boundaries to build connections.



**Figure 2.** Mia's narrative on "culturally appropriate" friendship.

These artistic representations were created during an arts workshop focused on peace, where friendship served as a lens through which children explored the essence of peace, shaped by their diverse cultural and religious understandings. Children's depictions of peace extended beyond the absence of conflict to encompass personal, symbolic, and communal aspirations, ranging from journeys across the sea to visions of home, play, and global harmony (Boukhari, 2025). This workshop provided an inclusive space for children to express perspectives on gender, culture, and religion, dimensions they cited as central to their integration experiences.



**Figure 3.** Aliya and Amadou on friendship and peace.

### 5.3. Language Freedoms: Reducing Linguistic Anxiety

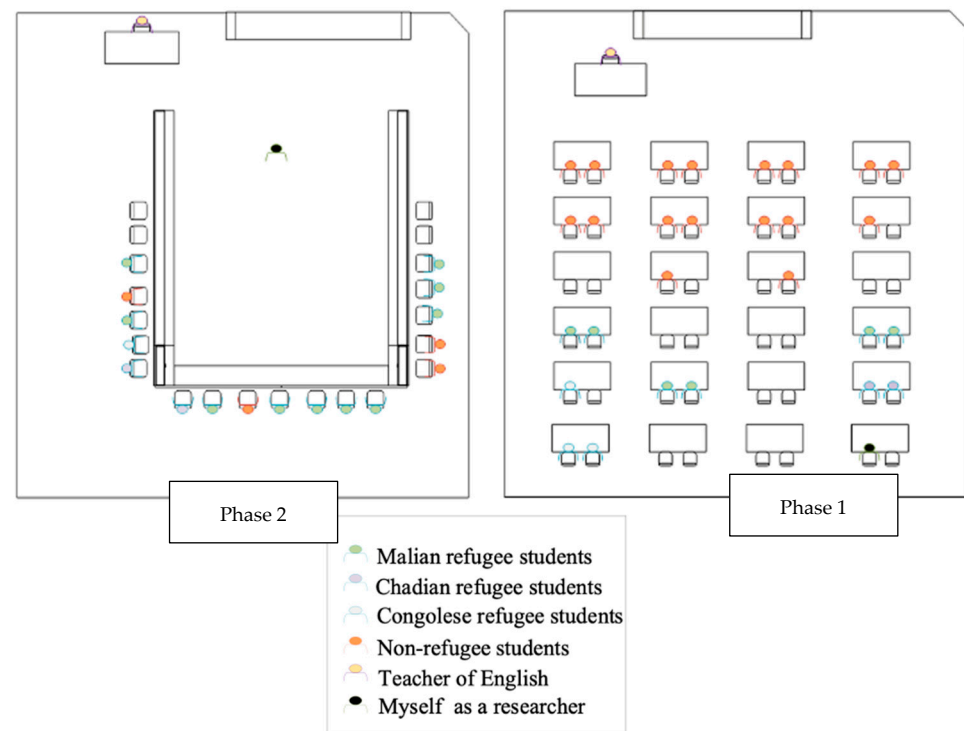
Sub-Saharan refugee children entering the school system often speak French, which is also the medium of instruction in the hosting francophone school. This alignment was intended as part of an inclusion strategy based on shared language. However, in formal classroom settings, teachers' frequent characterisation of refugee children's French as "flawed" or "imperfect" appears to create implicit barriers to their participation. Such linguistic pressures heighten anxieties about achieving "perfect" French, a standard many find unattainable in this context.

In contrast, the arts-based workshops conducted for this study intentionally dismantled hierarchical views of language by encouraging children to use any language, including their native tongues. This shift offered a safe, inclusive space, free from the pressures associated with formal classroom language standards. Refugee children were able to participate more freely, using drawing and storytelling to convey complex emotions and experiences without fear of correction or judgement. As one child expressed, the workshop environment made it easier to share ideas without fear of being corrected, highlighting how a flexible linguistic space can support both creative expression and academic participation.

### 5.4. Spatial Transformation: The U-Shaped Seating Arrangement

A transformative feature of the workshops was the introduction of a U-shaped seating arrangement. Conventional classroom layouts often position teachers as the focal point while physically separating refugee and non-refugee students. By contrast, the U-shaped arrangement used in the workshops promoted an egalitarian setting where all participants could see and interact with one another more directly.

In this layout, refugee and non-refugee students appeared more engaged, with several reporting that they felt more encouraged to participate. Notably, refugee students from different home countries, who initially kept to separate clusters, began sitting next to one another, indicating a gradual shift toward greater cohesion within the classroom. Observations showed increased peer-to-peer collaboration, with children freely sharing materials, discussing artwork, and breaking away from habitual groupings. Figure 4 below illustrates the change observed between both phases (Boukhari, 2023).



**Figure 4.** Seating arrangements observed during phases 1 and 2 of the study.

## 6. Discussion

This study highlights the complex relational, spatial, and linguistic dynamics shaping the educational experiences of refugee children, emphasising the need for trauma-informed and culturally/linguistically responsive practices to foster inclusion. The concept of the Relational Refugee Child (RRC) offers a valuable lens to explore how academic and social integration is not simply a matter of access but is embedded within webs of relationships, ruptured temporalities, and structural inequalities. While the literature on relational childhood is well established, the specific experiences of refugee children, marked by displacement, interrupted attachments, and shifting social worlds, demand deeper exploration (Chatty, 2013; Panter-Brick, 2014).

The RRC framework illuminates how children's identities and well-being are shaped not only by immediate peer and teacher interactions but also by broader societal discourses and structural conditions (Kaplan, 2023). Children are not passive recipients of trauma or policy; they actively negotiate belonging, rebuild social networks, and reinterpret notions of "home" in unfamiliar and often unwelcoming contexts (Phillimore, 2021). As such, the concept of the RRC reinforces the argument that inclusion must account for disrupted pasts, uncertain presents, and imagined futures, particularly in the school setting.

By integrating Bourdieu's symbolic violence and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we can further understand how refugee children's relational identities are shaped by institutional norms that may devalue their linguistic and cultural capital. This discussion moves beyond structural critiques to foreground how refugee children's relational agency interacts with systemic barriers, enabling both resistance and transformation. In this way, the RRC is not just a theoretical construct but a call to design education systems that honour the complexity of refugee childhood and build spaces of belonging through culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and relationally attuned practices.

### 6.1. Relational Dynamics: Spatial, Social, and Linguistic Relationships

In Sami's case (Section 5.1), the spatial arrangements within the classroom serve to normalise inequalities, positioning refugee children on the periphery both physically and educationally. This aligns with findings by [Araiza \(2021\)](#) and [Shankley et al. \(2023\)](#), which emphasise the need for educational environments to actively address and mitigate subtle forms of exclusion. Sami's experiences therefore highlight the interplay between spatial dynamics, teacher–student interactions, and institutional policies, all of which contribute to a sense of exclusion for refugee learners. [Bourdieu's \(2000\)](#) concept of symbolic violence elucidates how ostensibly neutral classroom practices can perpetuate social hierarchies.

A “just happens” narrative among teachers, who contend that refugee students choose to sit at the back, further demonstrates how passive acceptance of these patterns can mask underlying power structures. The Icosium adviser's comment that refugee children sometimes perceive punishment as racially or culturally motivated underscores how disciplinary actions are interpreted through the lens of identity. Teachers' well-meaning but sporadic interventions reveal that inclusion is often approached as an afterthought rather than a systemic goal. Such observations demonstrate how a lack of proactive, deliberate spatial planning and teacher engagement continues to sustain the marginalisation of refugee students.

#### 6.1.1. Cultural and Religious Nuances in Peer Relationships

Children's drawings and narratives (Section 5.2) illustrate how cultural and religious norms, such as prohibitions on physical contact between genders, can shape peer interactions in both facilitating and constraining ways. Aliya's embrace indicates the potential for deep friendships when schools foster inclusive and accepting environments, resonating with [Amina et al. \(2024\)](#), who argue that peer relationships are pivotal in fostering a sense of belonging. Conversely, Mia's “long-armed hug” highlights the negotiation children undertake to maintain cultural or religious boundaries while still forming meaningful bonds.

This echoes [H. Matthews' \(2003\)](#) contention that childhood is a socially mediated experience, influenced by relational and contextual factors. [Spicer \(2008\)](#) and [Pittaway \(2012\)](#) underscore that cultural and religious identities can heighten social inclusion or exclusion for refugee children, who must balance integration with the preservation of cultural identity. Similarly, [Pumariega and Joshi \(2010\)](#) note that cultural and religious teachings from early childhood can significantly shape relational behaviours, requiring active negotiation in environments with diverse norms. These relational dynamics are crucial for social and emotional well-being ([Sobitan, 2022](#)), underscoring the importance of normalising cultural and religious differences through inclusive practices ([Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014](#)).

#### 6.1.2. Linguistic Freedoms and Translanguaging

The pressures refugee children face to achieve “perfect” French (Section 5.3) echo what [Lippi-Green \(2012\)](#) describes as “language subordination”, whereby dominant language ideologies devalue non-standard varieties. Such demands for flawless language can marginalise learners whose repertoires involve multiple languages or dialects ([Weidl, 2022](#)). These findings align with [García and Wei's \(2013\)](#) advocacy of translanguaging, which recognises multilingual expression as legitimate rather than a deficit. In many contexts characterised by colonial histories, forced displacement, and multilingual realities, superdiversity involves constant mixing and shifting across cultural and linguistic boundaries, making it impossible to reduce any speaker's background to a single “mother tongue” ([Weidl, 2022](#)). Embracing these varied linguistic resources, rather than imposing uniform norms, proved essential in the arts-based workshops described in this study; by allowing native and “low-prestige” languages, the

workshops confronted hegemonic ideologies, enabling children to reclaim linguistic agency and confidence. Such inclusive environments may not only facilitate learning but also support emotional healing, given that trauma is frequently communicated through disrupted or silenced language (Busch & McNamara, 2020).

The workshops fostered a space where children could express themselves without fear of being corrected, reflecting a reduction in linguistic anxiety. This underscores how inclusive linguistic environments promote emotional security and active engagement, outcomes that resonate with Leavy's (2015) emphasis on the transformative potential of arts-based, participatory methods for marginalised groups. Moreover, validating children's full linguistic repertoires helps mitigate systemic inequities while fostering social belonging, identity, and agency (Cavallaro, 2020; Weidl, 2022; Bosch & Doedel, 2024).

Reflective dialogues with participating teachers immediately following these workshops revealed a marked shift in children's willingness to speak. Teachers observed that refugee learners, who had previously remained quiet or hesitant, began speaking more freely, challenging the usual insistence on "perfect" language. The workshops' openness to multilingual expression, reminiscent of García and Wei's (2013) concept of translanguaging, momentarily disrupted the expectation of uniform language use. This disruption echoes Lippi-Green's (2012) notion of "language subordination", highlighting how hierarchical language norms remain deeply embedded in educational spaces. While this shift does not signify the full dismantling of such norms, it marked a critical moment of reflection for teachers, prompting some to reconsider long-standing monolingual assumptions. Further research is needed to explore whether these changes persist beyond the workshop context and into everyday classroom practice.

### 6.1.3. Spatial Transformation and Disrupting Classroom Hierarchies

Conventional seating plans often reinforce power structures by focusing attention on the teacher (Reay, 2010) and relegating marginalised students to the periphery. By contrast, the U-shaped arrangement (Section 5.4) fostered equal visibility and encouraged direct interaction among refugee and non-refugee students, thereby challenging spatial marginalisation. Harris et al. (2023) note that spatial equality is vital for fostering inclusivity, as it ensures marginalised students feel recognised rather than overlooked. This reconfiguration facilitated spontaneous mingling among diverse groups of refugee children, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which highlights the impact of immediate social environments on children's development.

## 6.2. Implications for Practice and Policy: Toward the Relational Refugee Child

### 6.2.1. Whole-School Approaches: Designing Relational Spaces

Inclusion requires intentional strategies that centre refugee children's participation. Spatial configurations, such as U-shaped seating, disrupt hierarchical arrangements and support visibility and engagement (McArdle & Boldt, 2013; Frimberger, 2016). However, space alone is insufficient. Peer mentoring and collaborative learning counteract isolation and build confidence (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018), while arts-based approaches enable non-verbal expression and position students as knowledge-producers (Barber, 2022; Scott et al., 2023). Whole-school models that integrate spatial, relational, and creative strategies foster belonging and reposition refugee students as active participants.

### 6.2.2. Teacher Training: Embedding Relational Pedagogies

Teachers are central to shaping inclusive classrooms, yet many lack preparation in trauma-informed and relational practices (J. Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). Conventional training often privileges cognition over connection (Garvis, 2020), reinforcing passive models of refugee inclusion. Instead, educators must be supported to co-construct learning

with students (Kaukko et al., 2022). Effective training should integrate trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical reflexivity. These support emotional safety, affirm cultural and linguistic identities, and disrupt unconscious bias (Garvis, 2020; Scott et al., 2023). Without these, inclusion risks becoming performative.

Sustainable inclusion also requires structural policy support. Colour-blind models obscure systemic barriers and reinforce inequality (J. Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). A relational framework must promote translanguaging, bilingual education, and flexible curricula (Frimberger, 2016; Piazzoli & Kir Cullen, 2021). Responsibility must extend across schools, NGOs, and social services, embedding inclusion systemically rather than relying on individual goodwill.

## 7. Conclusions

This study calls for a shift from tokenistic inclusion to meaningful integration, where refugee children are not merely present but fully engaged. Trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and linguistically inclusive strategies enable educators to transform classrooms into equitable spaces that affirm and empower all learners. Children like Sami illustrate that inclusion is relational, not simply about access, but about feeling valued, heard, and able to thrive. By examining how trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices shape refugee children's relational experiences in Algerian national schools, this study highlights the need to reconfigure educational spaces, pedagogies, and relational dynamics. Trauma-informed approaches support psychological safety by acknowledging the realities of displacement, while culturally and linguistically responsive teaching validates identity and promotes active engagement.

Strategies such as flexible seating, peer mentoring, and arts-based workshops emerged as critical for fostering social cohesion and dismantling structural barriers. These interventions affirm that inclusion extends beyond academic performance to encompass emotional well-being, peer relationships, and identity recognition. Without such dimensions, refugee students risk exclusion despite being physically present. Achieving educational equity requires systemic integration that goes beyond individual teacher efforts. Policy-level commitments must embed inclusion structurally, supporting diverse learners through sustainable frameworks. Moving away from assimilationist models toward pluralistic, context-sensitive approaches is essential for cultivating authentic belonging.

The Relational Refugee Child framework developed in this study foregrounds refugee students' agency and situated inclusion within spatial, social, and linguistic domains. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, it challenges exclusionary structures and emphasises the need for systemic change. Ultimately, inclusion and integration must be seen as a dynamic, relational process rather than a static goal. Sustainable transformation depends on embedding these insights into policy and practice, ensuring that refugee children are recognised not as outsiders but as integral members of educational communities, capable of flourishing academically, socially, and emotionally.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym used to protect the organisation's identity, therefore the school's and participants' identity (Boukhari, 2023).

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