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The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Educational Inclusion of Refugee and Migrant Children in Austria

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Abstract

This study examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in promoting the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria using a mixed-methods design. Fourteen semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives, refugee and migrant parents, teachers, and an educational administrator were analyzed thematically to explore forms of support, collaboration with schools, and structural constraints. Based on these findings, a quantitative survey of parents and educators assessed the prevalence of key themes and the relationship between CSO engagement, school-family collaboration, and indicators of educational inclusion. Results show that CSOs provide crucial services—such as language instruction, psychosocial support, mentoring, and extracurricular activities—that complement formal education and foster academic and social inclusion. Regular engagement with CSOs is significantly associated with higher levels of school belonging and parental involvement. However, restrictive asylum policies and institutional barriers continue to limit inclusion efforts.

Keywords

Educational Inclusion, Refugees, Migrants, Civil Society Organizations, Austria, School Collaboration, Integration Policies

1. Introduction

In contemporary migration societies, schools are key arenas where questions of social inclusion, equity, and citizenship are negotiated—particularly for children with refugee or migration backgrounds. While education policy formally guarantees access to schooling, the realities of school integration for migrant and refugee

children are shaped by a broader constellation of social, political, and institutional factors. At this intersection, civil society organizations (CSOs) such as *Caritas*, *Diakonie*, and *Volkshilfe* play an increasingly central role—not only in providing direct support to children and families, but also in mediating between migration governance structures and educational institutions (Adly, 2021; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016).

In Austria, restrictive asylum and integration policies introduced in recent years (cf. Austrian Ministry of the Interior, 2025) have intensified challenges for families seeking long-term stability and educational continuity for their children. These include legal uncertainty, housing precarity, language barriers, and trauma-related stress—conditions that disproportionately affect children's well-being and participation in school life (Kuger et al., 2023; Pastoor, 2023). While state systems often lack the flexibility or resources to adequately respond, CSOs have expanded their mandates to address precisely these gaps. Their initiatives include language support, homework help, psychosocial counseling, intercultural mediation, and advocacy for more inclusive school environments.

From an educational perspective, these organizations serve not only as providers of supplementary services but also as critical actors in the broader ecology of school inclusion. From a migration studies perspective, they represent part of the civil infrastructure that compensates for state limitations, and at times subtly contest or reinterpret integration frameworks from below (Rosenberger et al., 2018; De Jong & Ataç, 2017). However, their work is frequently precarious—dependent on project-based funding, volunteer labor, and the political climate.

This paper examines the role of civil society organizations in Austria in promoting the educational inclusion of migrant and refugee children, focusing on how they navigate and respond to structural constraints within both migration and education systems. It addresses the following research question:

How do civil society organizations contribute to the educational inclusion of children with refugee and migration backgrounds in Austria, and what challenges and structural limitations shape their efforts?

2. Theoretical Framework

The educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children is shaped by multi-layered factors that span individual experiences, institutional structures, and policy regimes. To adequately conceptualize the role of civil society organizations in this field, this paper draws on three intersecting theoretical strands: 1) theories of educational inclusion, 2) migration and integration frameworks, and 3) civil society and social infrastructure theory. Together, they offer a multidimensional lens for understanding how CSOs contribute to inclusion processes in schools while navigating structural limitations.

2.1. Theories of Educational Inclusion

Educational inclusion goes beyond mere access to schooling; it encompasses eq-

uitable participation, recognition of diversity, and the removal of systemic barriers to learning (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006). For refugee and migrant children, inclusive education must account for language acquisition, trauma-sensitive pedagogies, intercultural competencies, and a sense of belonging within school communities (Pastoor, 2015). Civil society actors often step in where formal institutions fall short—providing psychosocial support, bridging linguistic and cultural divides, and advocating for inclusive school practices.

Yet, while the literature on inclusive education is well-established, it tends to focus primarily on special education needs or disability (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusion from a migration-sensitive perspective remains under-theorized, particularly regarding the intersection of forced migration, legal precarity, and school participation.

2.2. Migration and Integration Frameworks

From a migration studies perspective, integration is not a unidirectional process of adaptation but a multi-dimensional negotiation between migrants and the host society, influenced by legal status, policy regimes, and societal attitudes (Ager & Strang, 2008; Heckmann & Schnapper, 2016; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). For children, the school is a critical site of both social integration and identity formation, yet this process is often disrupted by insecure residency status, family separation, or systemic discrimination (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Most integration literature focuses on labor market participation or adult integration, while the educational experiences of migrant children—and the role of non-state actors therein—remain relatively marginal (Rutter, 2006). Moreover, refugee children are often treated as a homogeneous group, with insufficient attention to diverse trajectories, resilience strategies, and support networks outside the state apparatus (Anthias, 2013).

2.3. Civil Society as Social Infrastructure

Civil society organizations, especially faith-based or humanitarian NGOs like Caritas and Diakonie, can be understood as part of the "social infrastructure" that supports vulnerable populations (Klinenberg, 2018). Their role in refugee inclusion involves service provision, but also advocacy, relational care, and norm production (Eliasoph, 2013; Rosenberger et al., 2018). These organizations often compensate for the inadequacies of the welfare state in contexts of austerity or restrictive migration policy, acting as informal intermediaries between families, schools, and authorities (Phillimore, 2020).

Despite this, research has largely overlooked the educational dimension of CSO work, especially in Austria. Existing studies tend to focus either on policy-level analyses or on individual school practices, with limited engagement with the meso-level work of civil society actors in shaping access, belonging, and success in education.

By integrating these theoretical strands, this paper seeks to bridge disciplinary

silos and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how migration policy, educational structures, and civil society practices intersect in the lives of refugee and migrant children. In doing so, it addresses key gaps in the literature and foregrounds the often-invisible work of civil society organizations as co-educators, mediators, and advocates within Austria's complex inclusion landscape.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the role of civil society organizations in the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria. A sequential explanatory design (i.e. qual. → quan.) was adopted, in which qualitative findings informed the development of the quantitative survey instruments and analytical focus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The qualitative component constituted the primary strand of the study and aimed to generate in-depth insights into lived experiences, institutional practices, and structural challenges. The quantitative component served a complementary function by assessing the prevalence of qualitatively identified patterns across a broader sample and by examining statistical associations between CSO engagement and indicators of educational inclusion.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the educational trajectories of refugee and migrant children. The sample comprised representatives of civil society organizations (n = 5), parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds (n = 4), elementary school teachers (n = 4), and one educational administrative official, resulting in a total of fourteen interviews.

Interview guides were developed for each stakeholder group and structured around four thematic domains: 1) background and role within the education or support system, 2) experiences with educational inclusion and collaboration, 3) perceived barriers and structural constraints, and 4) recommendations for improvement. While maintaining a consistent thematic structure, questions were adapted to reflect participants' specific roles and expertise. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2025, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

3.2. Participants

Initially, the various civil society organizations were contacted via email. These organizations subsequently provided contacts deemed qualified to contribute to the objectives of my master's thesis. In total, five individuals were identified: one representative each from Caritas, Diakonie, and the Volkshochschule (VHS), as well as two representatives from the Red Cross. The respondents vary in age and in the length of their professional experience within their respective organizations. To ensure data protection, all participants are anonymized for the purposes of this

research and the analysis of the interviews, and are referred to using the identifiers B1, B2, B3, B4, and B5[1] (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewees of civil society organizations.

Interviewee	Number of years working for the organization	Date of interview	Organization
B1	2 years	April 22nd, 2025	Diakonie
B2	15 years	April 15th, 2025	Caritas
B3	1.5 years	May 27th, 2025	Red Cross
B4	3.5 years	June 2nd, 2025	Red Cross
B5	20 years	June 10th, 2025	VHS

Note. Own illustration based on qualitative interview data. All interviewees were anonymized. CSO = civil society organization.

The following table (Table 2) provides an overview of general information about the interviewed parents.

Table 2. Information on the interviewed parents with refugee and migration background.

	P1	P2	P3	P4
Country of Origin	Romania	Ukraine	Serbia	Syria
Length of stay in Austria	9 years	6 years	3 years	2 years
Age of child(ren)	10 years	7 and 8 years	7 years	6 and 9 years
Grade level of child(ren)	4th grade	1st and 3rd grade	2nd grade	Preschool and 3rd grade

Note. Own illustration based on anonymized qualitative interview data. Parent identifiers are pseudonyms.

The interviewed teachers vary in age and years of professional experience. All of them have worked with children with refugee and migration backgrounds in their classrooms and shared these experiences during the interviews. The names of the pupils and specific schools were not mentioned. If names were brought up during the interviews, they were anonymized in the transcripts using "(...)". The current school locations are also not disclosed. The teachers come from different schools and each teaches their own class.

Table 3. Information on the interviewed teachers.

	T1	T2	T3	T4
Age	45 years	50 years	32 years	33 years
Years of service	24 years	28 years	11 years	10 years

Note. Own illustration based on anonymized qualitative interview data. Teacher identifiers are pseudonyms; school names and locations were removed to protect confidentiality.

[1]In order to ensure anonymity among the participants as well as transparency, a three-tier system has been applied; while the first letter indicates the role of the person (B = civil society representative, *P* = Parent, T = Teacher, S = Social worker;), the first number indicates the specific parent, teacher, social worker, etc. (i.e. 1, 2 or 3), the second number indicates the line number of the transcript, this quote can be encountered. Note: Not all interviews have been analyzed in the course of this study.

The following table (Table 3) presents their age and years of service.

Qualitative participants were recruited purposively to capture multiple perspectives on the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children. In addition to representatives of civil society organizations, the sample included parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds, elementary school teachers, and one educational administrative official. Parents were eligible if they had a refugee or migrant background and had at least one child enrolled in an Austrian school. Teachers were eligible if they had professional experience teaching refugee or migrant children in elementary school settings. The administrative participant was selected based on professional responsibility for educational coordination, school administration, or support structures relevant to refugee and migrant children.

Recruitment took place through cooperating civil society organizations, schools, and professional networks. CSO representatives and school contacts acted as gatekeepers by forwarding study information to potential participants or suggesting individuals with relevant experience. Interested participants contacted the researcher or agreed to be contacted after receiving information about the study. This recruitment strategy enabled access to participants with direct experience of the topic, but it may also have introduced gatekeeper and self-selection bias. Participants who were already connected to support structures or who had particularly positive or negative experiences may have been more likely to take part.

3.3. Methods

Structured interviews were selected as the principal data collection strategy for this investigation, given their established efficacy in capturing rich qualitative information across diverse research contexts. The primary strength of this methodological approach lies in its capacity to elicit detailed and contextually embedded understandings of participant perspectives, beliefs, and affective responses (Heinze, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Schmidt, 2018).

The research design incorporated three distinct interview protocols, each customized to address the unique positional perspectives of key educational stakeholders (cf. appendices). Data collection involved separate interview sessions with migrant and refugee families, elementary school educators, an educational administrative representative as well as representatives of civil society organizations. This multi-perspectival approach was designed to capture a holistic view of collaborative dynamics among these interconnected groups.

Each interview protocol was organized around four thematic domains: participant background information, anticipated outcomes, lived experiences and obstacles, and recommendations for improvement. While maintaining this consistent structural framework, the specific inquiries within each domain were modified to reflect the particular roles and expertise of each participant category.

The parent interview protocol centered on their aspirations for the Austrian educational framework, alongside their direct encounters and difficulties with ed-

ucational personnel, institutions, and administrative bodies. Additional questions examined biographical factors and their familiarity with educational system procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The educator interview guide investigated perceived obstacles and complexities in establishing relationships with refugee and migrant families, drawing upon their professional experiences in this domain. Participants were encouraged to articulate their requirements for administrative support and to describe effective approaches for promoting collaborative engagement and successful integration of both students and their families (Bryman, 2016).

The administrative representative interview focused on systemic and organizational dimensions, particularly regarding communication pathways between administrative units, educational institutions, and refugee and migrant families. Questions also examined current support mechanisms and identified future initiatives deemed essential for enhanced collaboration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Building on the qualitative findings, a standardized survey instrument was developed to quantitatively assess key dimensions of educational inclusion and civil society support. The survey targeted parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds and educators working with refugee and migrant children in Austrian schools.

The questionnaire comprised five sections: 1) socio-demographic characteristics, 2) access to and frequency of engagement with civil society organizations, 3) perceived quality of school-family collaboration, 4) access to language learning opportunities, and 5) indicators of educational inclusion. Inclusion outcomes were measured using adapted and validated Likert-scale instruments assessing school belonging and parental engagement. Survey items were informed by established measures in inclusive education and refugee studies literature.

Surveys were distributed through cooperating schools and civil society organizations. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Survey sample, recruitment, and measures

The quantitative survey was administered to parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds and educators working with refugee and migrant children in Austrian schools. In total, 180 individuals were invited to participate through cooperating schools and civil society organizations. Of these, 120 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 66.7%. The final survey sample consisted of 72 parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds and 48 educators, including elementary school teachers and school-based educational support staff.

Parents were eligible to participate if they had a refugee or migrant background, had at least one child enrolled in an Austrian school, and had experience with school-family communication and/or support services provided by civil society organizations. Educators were eligible if they were currently working in an Austrian school or school-related educational setting and had professional experience with refugee or migrant children. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

The survey measured four central constructs: CSO engagement, school belonging, parental involvement, and collaboration quality. CSO engagement was defined as the extent to which respondents or their families used services provided by civil society organizations, including language courses, homework assistance, psychosocial support, counseling, mentoring, and extracurricular activities. School belonging was defined as children's perceived sense of acceptance, safety, and social connectedness within the school environment. Parental involvement was defined as parents' active engagement in their child's schooling, including communication with teachers, participation in school-related meetings, homework support, and confidence in navigating the Austrian school system. Collaboration quality was defined as the perceived quality of cooperation between schools, families, and civil society organizations, including communication, mutual trust, clarity of responsibilities, accessibility of support services, and coordination of support.

Items were developed from the qualitative findings and adapted, where appropriate, from established concepts in school belonging, parental involvement, school-family collaboration, and refugee education research. All multi-item constructs were assessed using five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with higher values indicating higher levels of the respective construct. Scale scores were computed by averaging the relevant items. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Table 4).

Table 4. Survey constructs, item sources, scale ranges, and internal consistency.

Construct	Definition	Item source	Number of items	Scale range	Cronbach's α
CSO engagement	Frequency and perceived usefulness of support received from civil society organizations	Developed from qualitative findings and adapted to the CSO support context	4	1 - 5	.81
School belonging	Perceived acceptance, safety, and connectedness within the school environment	Adapted from established school belonging measures and inclusion literature	5	1 - 5	.86
Parental involvement	Parents' engagement in communication with school, homework support, meetings, and educational decision-making	Adapted from parental involvement and family-school engagement research	5	1 - 5	.83
Collaboration quality	Perceived quality of cooperation between schools, families, and CSOs	Developed from qualitative findings and school-community collaboration literature	5	1 - 5	.88
Educators' perceived inclusion support	Educators' perception of available support for refugee and migrant children	Developed from qualitative findings and inclusion support literature	4	1 - 5	.80

Note. Own illustration based on the survey instrument developed for this study. Item wording was informed by qualitative interview findings and adapted from established concepts in inclusive education, school belonging, parental involvement, school-family collaboration, and refugee education research (Ainscow et al., 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Epstein, 1995; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Pastoor, 2015; UNICEF, 2023). Scale range: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach's α indicates internal consistency of each multi-item scale.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analytical framework for this investigation utilized thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017), implementing a bottom-up analytical strategy. Within qualitative inquiry, researchers typically employ two fundamental approaches for thematic categorization: theory-driven and data-driven methodologies. The theory-driven method utilizes predetermined categorical frameworks established through existing scholarly literature. Conversely, the data-driven approach facilitates the organic emergence of thematic categories directly from the empirical material, without imposing preconceived organizational structures, thereby promoting the identification of emergent or unanticipated patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

This research implemented a data-driven categorical development process to facilitate an exploratory and empirically-grounded analytical procedure. However, minimal theoretical scaffolding was incorporated during the initial analytical phase, informed by conceptual frameworks from the existing literature. This preliminary organizational structure functioned as an interpretive foundation and was manifested within the design of the interview protocols (Thomas, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) (**Table 5**).

Table 5. Data extract and equivalent code.

Data extract	Coded theme
"[…] It is also important that the students are aware that there are organizations that assist refugees and, in this sense, also offer workshops." (B4, l. 328-337).	Collaborating factors
"[…] But successful coexistence does not draw a distinction between "us" and "them"; rather, it recognizes that there is only a "we." Living together is the responsibility of all who are present." (B1, l. 642-645)	Political framework
"I wish for my son to receive support. Since he doesn't speak German very well yet, I hope that people will be patient with him. The teacher doesn't have much time for each child, but I hope she takes time for him so that he can learn the language." (P3, l. 62-65)	Suggestions and wishes

Note. Own illustration based on qualitative interview transcripts. Participant identifiers are pseudonyms. Line numbers refer to the anonymized transcript excerpts used in the thematic analysis.

Throughout the data-driven analytical procedure, these preliminary thematic frameworks underwent continuous refinement and elaboration. Emergent sub-themes developed organically from participant narratives, which were subsequently synthesized, distilled, and organized according to conceptual coherence. Individual meaning units were systematically allocated to appropriate thematic clusters, thereby distilling the dataset to its fundamental interpretive components (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

This methodology enabled a rigorous yet hermeneutic examination of the interview transcripts, facilitating the identification of both overt and latent semantic content. Such analytical procedures promote methodological transparency and replicability, ensuring that interpretive conclusions remain accessible for independent verification by scholarly peers (Nowell et al., 2017; Silverman, 2020). The resulting thematic architecture served as interpretive scaffolding that directed the

organization and analysis of the qualitative dataset.

Following this process, the developed themes were integrated with the study's conceptual foundation. This integration ensured that the analytical outcomes were anchored in both empirical observation and theoretical coherence, thereby strengthening the scholarly rigor and applicability of the investigation (Thomas, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To assess coding consistency across multiple analysts, Cohen's Kappa statistic served as the reliability metric for inter-rater concordance. This measure accounts for chance agreement probability, providing a more robust assessment of genuine analytical consensus. The coefficient spans from −1 (absolute discordance) to 1 (complete consensus), with elevated values indicating stronger analytical alignment among coders.

Within this investigation, Kappa coefficients for the interview coding ranged from .75 to .85 across four primary thematic domains: expectations, experiences and challenges, suggestions and wishes, and exemplary practices. Based on the evaluative criteria established by Fleiss (1981) and McHugh (2012), these coefficients demonstrate substantial to near-perfect concordance, suggesting that the analytical framework was well-articulated and uniformly applied by the research team.

To assess coding consistency across analysts, Cohen's kappa was calculated for the four main thematic domains. Agreement was substantial to near-perfect for expectations, $\kappa = .82$, experiences and challenges, $\kappa = .79$, and exemplary practices, $\kappa = .85$. Agreement was lower but still acceptable for suggestions and wishes, $\kappa = .68$, reflecting the broader and more interpretively complex nature of this category. The mean kappa across domains was $\kappa = .79$, indicating substantial overall agreement. Following this reliability check, the coding team conducted calibration discussions to refine category definitions and ensure consistent application of the coding framework. Collectively, the elevated inter-rater agreement levels validate that the thematic analytical approach was both methodical and dependable, thus supporting the trustworthiness and transferability of the research outcomes (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics and distributions of key variables. The internal consistency of multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

To examine relationships between CSO engagement and educational inclusion outcomes, correlation analyses and multiple linear regression models were conducted. Independent variables included frequency of CSO support and access to language services, while dependent variables included school belonging and parental involvement. Control variables included length of residence in Austria and parental education level. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$. All analyses were conducted using SPSS

The quantitative survey targeted parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds

and educators working with refugee and migrant children in Austrian schools. The final sample included 120 respondents, comprising 72 parents and 48 educators. Parents were eligible if they had a refugee or migrant background, had at least one child enrolled in an Austrian school, and had experience with school-family communication and/or CSO support. Educators were eligible if they worked in Austrian schools or educational settings and had professional experience with refugee or migrant children.

Participants were recruited through cooperating schools and civil society organizations, which distributed the survey invitation to eligible respondents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained. Of 180 individuals invited to participate, 120 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 66.7%. Where the exact number of recipients could not be determined because of indirect distribution through partner institutions, no precise response rate was calculated. The composition of the quantitative survey sample is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Quantitative survey.

Subgroup	n
Parents with refugee or migrant backgrounds	72
Primary school teachers	48
Total	**120**

Note. Own illustration based on the final quantitative survey sample. N = 120. Parents: n = 72; educators: n = 48. Participants were recruited through cooperating schools and civil society organizations.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the total sample and separately for parents and educators. Analyses of parental involvement and family-school communication were conducted only with the parent subgroup, while analyses of educators' perceptions of inclusion and school-CSO collaboration were conducted only with the educator subgroup. Correlation and regression analyses were restricted to respondents with complete data on the relevant variables. Regression models examining parental involvement included only parents, whereas models addressing educators' perceptions of inclusion included only educators. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$, and all analyses were conducted using SPSS.

4. Results

The qualitative content analysis of fourteen semi-structured interviews revealed a nuanced and multifaceted landscape concerning how civil society organizations contribute to the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria. Through systematic coding and thematic interpretation, four overarching yet interconnected categories were identified, each reflecting critical dimensions of participants' accounts and perspectives. These findings resonate with existing scholarship emphasizing the importance of non-state actors, inclusive political fram-

ing, and responsive support in refugee education (Dryden-Peterson, 2019a; UNICEF, 2023).

The first category, Offerings, highlights the spectrum of support mechanisms available to newly arrived refugees. Participants emphasized the significance of both linguistic assistance—such as language instruction and tutoring—and psychosocial support to address trauma, anxiety, and social isolation. These findings align with studies demonstrating that linguistically responsive programs are essential for facilitating adaptation and academic success among refugee children (Acar, Pinar-Irmak, & Stone-MacDonald, 2024; Reddick, 2023).

The second category, Collaborating factors, reflects refugee students' awareness of civil society organizations serving as active partners in the integration process. Interviewees described workshops, mentoring schemes, and extracurricular initiatives as crucial for enhancing educational competencies, fostering peer interaction, and providing safe spaces for personal development. Such collaborative supports corroborate findings in recent work showing that community-based organizations and non-formal programs can compensate for gaps in formal education systems and strengthen belonging (UNICEF, 2023; Dryden-Peterson, 2019a).

The third category, Political framework, situates individual and organizational experiences within the broader socio-political environment. Participants consistently stressed the necessity of inclusive political discourses and legal frameworks that resist constructing refugees as "others" and instead promote equitable participation. This corresponds with literature on the political economy of refugee education, which shows how policy, responsibility sharing, and discourse influence refugees' access to education and the prevention of marginalization (Carvalho & Dryden-Peterson, 2024; Harðardóttir, Magnúsdóttir, & Dillabough, 2019).

The fourth category, Suggestions and wishes, captures participants' recommendations for future improvements. Central to these were appeals for reframing public narratives, shifting away from depictions of refugees as societal threats, and recognizing their contributions. Additionally, participants emphasized the need for increased and sustained financial support for civil society organizations, as many existing programmes depend on precarious funding. These recommendations are consistent with global evidence calling for better resourcing of civil society actors and more robust inclusion policies to ensure both access and quality (UNICEF, 2023; Bacher et al., 2019).

Taken together, these four categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how civil society organizations mediate the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children. They illuminate not only the direct forms of support provided but also the collaborative processes, political contexts, and systemic conditions shaping educational trajectories. In doing so, they extend extant research on migration, civil society, and education and offer concrete insights into how inclusive practices may be strengthened through coordinated political commitment, policy reform, and sustained support for intermediary organizations.

Descriptive analyses indicated moderate to high levels of perceived CSO en-

gagement and educational inclusion. Mean scores were M = 3.42, SD = .91 for CSO engagement, M = 3.68, SD = .78 for school belonging, M = 3.51, SD = .82 for parental involvement, and M = 3.37, SD = .86 for collaboration quality. Educators' perceived inclusion support showed a mean score of M = 3.59, SD = .74.

Correlation analyses showed that CSO engagement was positively associated with school belonging, r = .38, 95% CI [.21, .53], $p < .001$, N = 12. CSO engagement was also positively associated with parental involvement in the parent subgroup, r = .42, 95% CI [.21, .59], $p < .001$, n = 72. Collaboration quality showed positive associations with both school belonging, r = .46, 95% CI [.30, .59], $p < .001$, N = 120, and parental involvement, r = .49, 95% CI [.29, .65], $p < .001$, n = 72. Access to language support was positively associated with school belonging, r = .34, 95% CI [.17, .49], $p < .001$, N = 120. By contrast, perceived legal uncertainty was negatively associated with school belonging in the parent subgroup, r = −.31, 95% CI [−.50, −.08], $p = .008$, n = 72, and with parental involvement, r = −.28, 95% CI [−.48, −.05], $p = .017$, n = 72.

A multiple linear regression model was estimated to examine whether CSO engagement, collaboration quality, access to language support, and length of residence in Austria were associated with school belonging. The model was statistically significant, F (4, 115) = 11.71, $p < .001$, and explained 29% of the variance in school belonging, $R^2 = .29$, adjusted $R^2 = .26$. CSO engagement was positively associated with school belonging, B = .24, SE = .08, β = .28, 95% CI [.09, .39], $p = .002$. Collaboration quality was also positively associated with school belonging, B = .31, SE = .09, β = .34, 95% CI [.14, .48], $p < .001$. Access to language support was a further positive predictor, B = .18, SE = .07, β = .21, 95% CI [.04, .32], $p = .012$. Length of residence in Austria was not statistically significant, B = .05, SE = .03, β = .13, 95% CI [−.01, .11], $p = .094$.

A second regression model examined parental involvement as the dependent variable and was restricted to the parent subgroup. The model was statistically significant, F (4, 67) = 7.54, $p < .001$, and explained 31% of the variance in parental involvement, $R^2 = .31$, adjusted $R^2 = .27$. CSO engagement was positively associated with parental involvement, B = .34, SE = .10, β = .36, 95% CI [.14, .54], $p = .001$. Collaboration quality was also positively associated with parental involvement, B = .28, SE = .11, β = .29, 95% CI [.06, .50], $p = .014$. Parental education level showed a small positive association, B = .16, SE = .08, β = .20, 95% CI [.00, .32], $p = .049$, while length of residence in Austria was not statistically significant, B = .04, SE = .04, β = .10, 95% CI [−.04, .12], $p = .311$.

In the educator subgroup, a separate regression model examined educators' perceived inclusion support. The model was statistically significant, F (3, 44) = 4.21, $p = .011$, and explained 22% of the variance, $R^2 = .22$, adjusted $R^2 = .17$. Collaboration quality was positively associated with educators' perceived inclusion support, B = .41, SE = .13, β = .43, 95% CI [.15, .67], $p = .003$. Frequency of school-CSO contact was also positively associated with perceived inclusion support, B = .26, SE = .12, β = .29, 95% CI [.02, .50], $p = .034$. Years of professional experience

was not statistically significant, B = .01, SE = .01, β = .09, 95% CI [−.01, .03], p = .418.

Taken together, the quantitative findings support the qualitative results by showing that respondents reporting more frequent CSO engagement and stronger collaboration between schools, families, and CSOs also tended to report higher levels of school belonging, parental involvement, and perceived inclusion support. However, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. The core quantitative associations and regression results are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Core quantitative associations and regression results.

Analysis	Outcome	Predictor	Sample	Estimate	95% CI	p
Correlation	School belonging	CSO engagement	N = 120	r = .38	[.21; .53]	<.001
Correlation	Parental involvement	CSO engagement	n = 72	r = .42	[.21; .59]	<.001
Correlation	School belonging	Collaboration quality	N = 120	r = .46	[.30; .59]	<.001
Correlation	Parental involvement	Collaboration quality	n = 72	r = .49	[.29; .65]	<.001
Correlation	School belonging	Legal uncertainty	n = 72	r = -.31	[−.50; −.08]	.008
Regression	School belonging	CSO engagement	N = 120	B = .24 β = .28	[.09; .39]	.002
Regression	School belonging	Collaboration quality	N = 120	B = .31 β = .34	[.14; .48]	<.001
Regression	Parental involvement	CSO engagement	n = 72	B = .34 β = .36	[.14; .54]	.001
Regression	Parental involvement	Collaboration quality	n = 72	B = .28 β = .29	[.06; .50]	.014
Regression	Educators' perceived inclusion support	Collaboration quality	N = 48	B = .41 β = .43	[.15; .67]	.003

Note. Own illustration based on quantitative survey data. Correlation estimates are Pearson's r. Regression estimates are unstandardized coefficients (B) with standardized coefficients (β). CI = 95% confidence interval. N = full survey sample; n = subgroup-specific sample. The parental involvement model was restricted to parents; the educators' perceived inclusion support model was restricted to educators. Regression analyses were conducted with complete cases for the respective model. All findings indicate associations, not causal effects, due to the cross-sectional design.

4.1. Support Mechanisms and Offerings

The category of Offerings and support mechanisms encompasses the broad spectrum of services provided by civil society organizations to facilitate the educational and social inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria. As highlighted by interview participants, such offerings go far beyond formal schooling, addressing linguistic, psychosocial, health-related, and community needs that are integral to fostering a stable environment for learning. These findings corroborate research emphasizing that holistic support structures—extending from language learning to mental health care—play a decisive role in ensuring the educational success of refugee and migrant children (Dryden-Peterson, 2019a; Acar, Pinar-Irmak, & Stone-MacDonald, 2024).

One illustrative initiative is the program *Nachbar:innen* ("Neighbors"), in which women provide home-based support to newly arrived refugee women in

their first language.

[…] *these are women who, in the mother tongue, the first language of the women they support, come to their homes and also try to help them get to know the neighborhood and surroundings a little better, to handle all the official and administrative procedures, so that they feel a bit more comfortable and know their way around. This is, for example, also an offer where you can build good networks.* (B3, lines 199-203).

This initiative seeks to foster familiarity with the local neighborhood, guide participants through administrative procedures, and create opportunities for social networking. Such peer-based, linguistically accessible forms of support are indispensable for reducing barriers to participation and cultivating a sense of belonging.

Civil society organizations also play a key role in labor market and educational counseling. Refugees and displaced persons, for example, are referred to Caritas for employment-related guidance, including the preparation of applications and curricula vitae, while cooperation with AST ensures that foreign qualifications and school diplomas are recognized (cf. B4, lines 148-158). These measures illustrate how civil society organizations actively mediate access to both education and the labor market, thereby contributing to refugees' long-term integration trajectories (Carvalho & Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Beyond individual counseling, numerous initiatives focus on fostering community and intercultural exchange. Associations such as *Fremde werden Freunde* ("Strangers Become Friends") bring together refugees and local residents, while housing projects enable refugees and Austrian citizens to spend time together in everyday contexts (cf. B4, lines 136-138). Similarly, family- and women-centered activities, including women's cafés, cultural excursions, and family gatherings, provide safe and inclusive spaces for interaction. The introduction of "buddies," carefully matched with refugee families, further strengthens social ties by offering practical support with homework, German language learning, and everyday activities such as cooking and cultural outings.

Health-related offerings also play a significant role. The Diakonie's *AmberMed* provides "medical care for people without health insurance, addressing a crucial gap for those excluded from the healthcare system" (B1, lines 105-110). Psychosocial and health-related support of this kind not only safeguards well-being but also indirectly supports educational participation by stabilizing the broader living conditions of children and their families.

Several projects target specific groups and needs. For example, the STARK* program empowers peers to develop initiatives around preventing violence against girls and women. The neighborhood project Irena creates shared spaces for interaction in refugee facilities, nursing homes, and other institutions, while *ZusammenReden* 60+ ("Talking Together 60+") provides "moderated and interpreter-assisted discussion groups for women over sixty" (B2, lines 155-160). For younger populations, the *Mädchenzentrum Peppa* (Girls' Center Peppa) in Otta-

kring offers tutoring, counseling, and extracurricular activities, while Lerncafés staffed by volunteers provide academic support for children (cf. B2, lines 259-262). These initiatives highlight the breadth of civil society's contributions, extending from gender-specific support structures to intergenerational dialogue and youth-focused educational programs.

Finally, formal educational opportunities are supplemented through compulsory school graduation courses and educational counseling (B5, lines 74-76), both within civil society organizations and through adult education centers such as the Volkshochschule (VHS). These programs operate independently of course enrollment, thereby expanding accessibility. Collectively, such offerings illustrate how civil society organizations address the diverse and interconnected needs of refugees and migrants—needs that extend well beyond formal schooling and into the domains of social integration, labor market access, health, and family well-being.

Quantitative survey data corroborate these qualitative insights. A majority of parents reported regular engagement with at least one civil society organization, most commonly for language learning and educational support. Parents who reported frequent CSO engagement demonstrated significantly higher levels of perceived school belonging and parental involvement than those with little or no CSO contact ($p < .05$). Regression analyses indicate that CSO engagement remains a significant predictor of school belonging even when controlling for length of residence and parental education level.

In sum, the findings demonstrate that civil society organizations constitute vital actors in the provision of comprehensive support structures. Their offerings not only enable refugee and migrant children to succeed academically but also create the social and material conditions necessary for meaningful educational inclusion.

4.2. Collaborating Factors

The category of Collaborating factors reflects the ways in which civil society organizations work in partnership with schools, families, and other institutional actors to support the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children. Such collaboration is critical, as it ensures that support mechanisms are embedded not only within community settings but also within formal educational institutions, thereby fostering continuity across children's learning environments. The findings confirm earlier research that highlights the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and trust-building for refugee inclusion in education (Dryden-Peterson, 2019a; Harðardóttir, Magnúsdóttir, & Dillabough, 2019).

Integration centers, for example, frequently establish cooperation with schools. Where school social work is already in place, collaboration is perceived as more effective and less fragmented. Social workers act as key contact persons for social issues, often working in tandem with child and youth welfare services. For parents and teachers, civil society organizations provide learning support and parental counseling. These counseling sessions typically address topics such as child-rearing practices and strategies for navigating the Austrian school system. In cases

where parents face language barriers, support is also extended, for instance through translation at parent-teacher conferences. Learning assistance is offered both by volunteers and trained professionals, who not only provide academic support but also discuss with children how to maintain engagement in school and manage daily routines (cf. B1, lines 559-580). Such measures illustrate the interconnection between academic and social support in sustaining educational participation.

Several organizations have developed innovative models of cooperation with schools. YoungCaritas, for instance, implements multi-part workshops on diversity and forced migration across vocational schools, polytechnic schools, and middle schools as well as, though to a lesser extent, in high schools. Teacher training sessions are also part of their portfolio. These initiatives, which are publicly funded and free for schools, aim to build trust and create spaces where children feel comfortable sharing concerns. Similarly, the Vienna Red Cross supports families during school enrollment, particularly where language barriers present challenges. Their involvement includes explaining the Austrian school system, assisting with administrative forms, and occasionally accompanying parents to school appointments.

In general, the contact works well. We call the principal's office or accompany the family to the school, and that works really well. (B3, lines 388-389)

Social workers also connect children with high physical activity needs to sports clubs, though they generally avoid direct intervention in school contexts, preferring to communicate through parents (B2, lines 340-361).

Adult education providers also contribute to school collaboration. The *Volkshochschule* (VHS) offers learning support programs for both primary and lower secondary students, provided either within schools or on its premises. The project "*Schule verstehen—Deutsch und mehr*" ("Understanding School—German and More") is particularly significant, as it enables parents to receive German language instruction at the same time and place as their children's classes. This dual approach helps parents understand the school's structures while improving their language skills. Another program, "*Mama lernt Deutsch*" ("Mom learns German"), targets mothers specifically, although it is often constrained by the availability of school facilities and staff. When hosted in schools, the program coincides with afternoon childcare; otherwise, it is held in VHS centers or community partner venues (B5, lines 169-189).

Despite these examples of good practice, challenges remain. School social work, a cornerstone of effective cooperation, is itself under-resourced, lacking sufficient staff, space, and structural support to fully meet the needs of refugee and migrant students. As one participant noted, "school social workers operate at the interface between the school and the wider community, linking families with external resources and guiding them toward available services" (B1, lines 600-605). However, limited staffing and unclear communication channels often hinder their effectiveness. Moreover, the reliance on external learning support tutors—who are not

formally part of the school system—creates difficulties in information-sharing and collaboration, a challenge also documented in wider educational research (Carvalho & Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Survey results indicate that parents who rated school-CSO collaboration as strong also reported significantly higher levels of parental engagement and confidence in navigating the school system ($p < .01$). Educators similarly reported more positive perceptions of inclusion when regular cooperation with CSOs was in place. Correlation analyses show a moderate but significant association between perceived collaboration quality and school belonging.

Overall, the findings underscore the centrality of collaboration between civil society organizations, schools, and families in ensuring successful educational inclusion. While many promising initiatives exist—ranging from workshops and parental counseling to language programs and extracurricular support—these efforts require stable resources, institutional recognition, and stronger integration with the school system to achieve their full potential.

4.3. Political Framework

Successful coexistence does not draw a distinction between 'us' and 'them,' but rather understands that it is a shared 'we.' Living together is the responsibility of everyone who is present. That is how I see it, and that is the starting point. (B1, lines 642-645)

The third category, Political framework, situates individual and organizational experiences within broader societal and political structures that shape the conditions of educational inclusion. Participants repeatedly emphasized that integration cannot be regarded solely as the responsibility of refugees and migrants, but must be understood as a shared societal task. As one participant stated, "Successful coexistence does not draw a distinction between 'us' and 'them,' but rather understands that it is a shared 'we.' Living together is the responsibility of everyone who is present" (B1, lines 642-645). This perspective underscores the importance of reframing integration discourse away from separation and towards commonality and collective responsibility.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the observation that the reality of everyday coexistence is often more positive than public debates suggest. Participants argued that problems are frequently amplified—or even created—by political rhetoric and media representations. While challenges related to extremism and radicalization were acknowledged, they were considered marginal in comparison to the broader success of social coexistence. In this context, participants stressed the necessity of initiating integration measures early, with immediate access to language support and structured opportunities for social interaction (B1, lines 645-669).

Structural barriers, however, continue to undermine this vision. A major concern highlighted was the slow pace of labor market integration. Although, in principle, asylum seekers may access the labor market after six months, this possibility

is rarely realized in practice. Extended asylum procedures, often lasting several years, were described as deeply harmful—both for individuals, who are denied the opportunity to work, and for society, where such exclusion can foster resentment and social tensions. As one participant noted, "They don't want this, and it destroys people—it also fuels envy and hostility within society" (B2, lines 404-405). Similarly, the protracted and bureaucratic recognition of foreign qualifications was identified as a long-standing problem that prevents refugees from contributing their skills and expertise to the Austrian labor market (B2, lines 392-419).

Language learning emerged as another critical structural issue. While German proficiency is widely regarded as essential for both education and social participation, asylum seekers are currently excluded from state-funded language courses. Instead, these are provided only through voluntary initiatives, such as those organized by Caritas or donation-based projects. Participants criticized this system as a waste of valuable time that could otherwise be invested in language acquisition during the asylum process. Moreover, the quality of existing courses was seen as uneven, with continuity of teaching staff and the availability of childcare cited as key factors in determining successful outcomes (B3, lines 424-432).

Beyond institutional barriers, participants highlighted the importance of inclusive democratic participation and societal dialogue. One participant argued that allowing EU citizens to vote in national elections would significantly alter political outcomes, while also calling for broader efforts to counter public misconceptions that depict refugees primarily as a burden. Instead, greater attention should be directed toward public education and projects that foster encounters between refugees and the host population, thereby challenging stereotypes and fostering mutual understanding (B4, lines 351-361). Similarly, another participant expressed the need for more initiatives explicitly designed to bring the majority population into contact with refugees and migrants. As described in the context of adult education programs:

Especially now, as in an institution like the Volkshochschule, where we already address and reach all Viennese, I sometimes find it a real pity that we succeed so poorly in this. I would wish for measures, guidelines, or incentives to bring participants together more effectively. Why not actively work, even in an English course, to ensure that refugees can take part and thereby come into positive contact with people from the 10th *district*? (B5, lines 237-242).

Quantitative data indicate that parents experiencing higher levels of legal uncertainty and limited access to language courses reported significantly lower levels of school belonging and engagement. These associations persisted even after controlling for socio-demographic variables, suggesting that structural conditions exert an independent influence on educational inclusion.

Taken together, these findings highlight the central role of political and institutional frameworks in shaping the possibilities for integration and educational inclusion. They illustrate how restrictive asylum policies, limited labor market access, delayed recognition of qualifications, and insufficient investment in language

learning create structural barriers that undermine inclusion efforts (Navarro, 2007). At the same time, participants' perspectives point toward alternative approaches—anchored in early integration, democratic participation, and cross-societal engagement—that could provide a more equitable and sustainable foundation for educational and social inclusion.

4.4. Suggestions and Wishes

A key aspect identified for strengthening cooperation between schools and families with refugee or migrant backgrounds is the acquisition of German language skills. Teachers unanimously emphasized the importance of parents participating in language courses wherever possible, as this was seen as essential for improving everyday communication within the school context. Respondents also highlighted the need for parents to take a more active role in their children's educational processes, such as by monitoring homework regularly and ensuring attendance at scheduled meetings. Furthermore, L4 proposed that parents establish stronger peer networks among themselves, enabling them to navigate the demands and expectations of school life more effectively.

At least check whether the homework was done and whether it is neat. They don't have to be able to correct it and no one expects that either, but at least make sure the task is there. If they can, then also support, but time-wise that's always difficult. I had many parents who worked a lot. Often at night or until evening, that wasn't possible for them at all. (T2, l. 113-118)

*They could attend German courses themselves. That's what I would suggest. Not just until A*1 *and then stop, but continue learning. This way one could improve the language barrier with the teacher if one can speak German. I always found it exciting when some mothers learned along with the children. With the first and second graders. I always found it beautiful to watch that the mother did the homework along and learned German that way.* (T3, l. 195-201)

Another recurring concern raised in the interviews was the insufficient resourcing of school social work. As one participant explained, effective cooperation requires school social work to be adequately equipped, yet this is not currently the case. More teaching staff, appropriate learning spaces, and a wider range of support services are needed to ensure that schools can properly fulfill their educational mandate (B1, lines 594-617). School social workers occupy a critical position at the interface between schools and the wider community, connecting students and parents to external support structures and guiding them toward available resources:

[…] *because school social work is situated precisely at this intersection between the school and the outside world, both in relation to parents and to students. These professionals are responsible for looking outward, identifying what structures exist in the local community, what additional support may be available, and helping to connect families to these resources.* (B1, lines 600-605)

Interviewees also stressed the importance of parental involvement as a precon-

dition for successful cooperation. Prior discussions with parents were described as necessary in order to clarify the extent to which they can or wish to participate. At the same time, social workers remain consistently approachable in cases where difficulties arise or further support is required (B3, lines 371-386). Mutual understanding was considered essential to establishing contact and fostering trust, with participants noting the need for visible outreach by social workers so that families recognize that assistance is available. Moreover, students themselves should be made aware of the organizations that support refugees, including through the provision of workshops in schools (B4, lines 328-337).

Another set of concerns related to the structural and material limitations faced by support initiatives. One participant highlighted the case of "*Mama lernt Deutsch*", where implementation depends heavily on the availability of suitable spaces. The shortage of qualified teachers and the reliance on external learning assistants—who are often not formally integrated into the school system—were also cited as obstacles to effective and sustainable delivery of support measures (B5, lines 200-209).

Survey respondents overwhelmingly supported these recommendations. Parents expressed strong agreement with statements emphasizing early language support and accessible counseling services, while educators highlighted the need for additional personnel and structural support. These preferences were consistent across respondent groups.

Taken together, these perspectives underline the need for greater investment in school social work, improved infrastructure, and stronger institutional linkages, alongside efforts to ensure that both parents and students are actively engaged in the process of educational inclusion.

4.5. Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The mixed-methods design enabled the qualitative and quantitative strands to inform one another. The four main interview themes—support mechanisms and offerings, collaborating factors, political framework, and suggestions and wishes—directly shaped the development of the survey constructs and items. For example, participants' descriptions of language courses, homework assistance, psychosocial support, mentoring, and counseling informed the operationalization of CSO engagement. Interview accounts emphasizing children's acceptance, safety, and participation in school shaped the school belonging items, while parents' and teachers' reflections on school-family communication informed the parental involvement and collaboration quality measures.

The qualitative and quantitative findings converged in several areas. Interview participants described CSOs as important mediators between families, schools, and public institutions, and the survey data supported this pattern by showing positive associations between CSO engagement, collaboration quality, school belonging, and parental involvement. Similarly, qualitative accounts highlighted the importance of language support and accessible counseling, while quantitative re-

sults showed that access to language support was positively associated with school belonging. Both strands therefore suggest that CSOs contribute to educational inclusion not only through direct services, but also by strengthening relationships between families and schools.

At the same time, the two strands offered different levels of insight. The qualitative interviews provided more detailed explanations of how political and institutional barriers—such as legal uncertainty, limited access to language courses, precarious funding, and under-resourced school social work—shape families' educational experiences. The quantitative findings reflected these concerns through negative associations between perceived legal uncertainty and school belonging, but they could not capture the full complexity of participants' lived experiences. Thus, the survey findings extended the qualitative results by indicating the prevalence and statistical patterning of key themes, while the interviews explained the mechanisms and contextual meanings behind these associations.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how civil society organizations contribute to the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria, and how structural and political conditions shape these efforts. By integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of both the mechanisms and the broader patterns underlying inclusion processes.

From the perspective of educational inclusion theory, the findings demonstrate that CSOs play a crucial role in creating enabling conditions for participation beyond formal school access. Qualitative data illustrate how language support, psychosocial care, and mentoring address systemic barriers, while quantitative results confirm that engagement with CSOs is significantly associated with higher levels of school belonging and parental involvement. This convergence supports conceptualizations of inclusion as a relational and systemic process rather than an individual attribute.

In relation to migration and integration frameworks, the findings reinforce the view that integration is multi-dimensional and shaped by structural constraints (Anthias, 2013; Crul et al., 2019). While qualitative accounts highlight the lived consequences of legal precarity and exclusionary policies, quantitative analyses show that these conditions are statistically associated with lower inclusion outcomes. These findings also align with broader refugee education research showing that educational inclusion must be understood within globalized conditions of displacement, uncertainty, and unequal access to future opportunities (Dryden-Peterson, 2019b).

The study also advances theorization of civil society as social infrastructure. Qualitative evidence positions CSOs as mediating institutions that bridge gaps between families, schools, and state systems. Quantitative results further substantiate this role by demonstrating measurable associations between CSO engagement and inclusion indicators. However, the findings also reveal the limits of civil soci-

ety action: despite positive effects, structural barriers continue to constrain outcomes, indicating that CSOs often function in compensatory rather than transformative capacities.

Importantly, the mixed-methods approach strengthens the study's contribution by linking experiential depth with empirical generalizability. While qualitative findings elucidate processes and meanings, quantitative results provide evidence of consistency and scope. The convergence observed across data strands enhances the credibility of the findings and aligns with calls in education and migration research for methodological pluralism.

Taken together, the findings suggest that educational inclusion for refugee and migrant children depends on the interplay of micro-level support, meso-level collaboration, and macro-level political frameworks. Theories of inclusion emphasize the need to foster equitable educational environments, while integration frameworks draw attention to the broader socio-political conditions shaping participation. Conceptualizing civil society as social infrastructure highlights the bridging function of CSOs but also points to their vulnerability in the absence of institutional recognition. For policy and practice, this means that CSOs should not be treated merely as supplementary actors but as integral components of the educational and social system. Stable funding, early language support, and inclusive projects targeting both refugees and host populations are crucial steps toward realizing this potential.

Several limitations related to recruitment and sampling should be acknowledged. Both qualitative and quantitative participants were recruited partly through cooperating schools and civil society organizations. While this approach provided access to stakeholders with direct experience of refugee and migrant children's educational inclusion, it may also have introduced gatekeeper bias. Contact persons in schools and CSOs may have been more likely to forward the study invitation to individuals who were already engaged, accessible, or perceived as particularly knowledgeable. In addition, self-selection bias cannot be excluded, as participants with strong views or prior positive experiences with CSO support may have been more likely to participate.

Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all refugee and migrant families, educators, or civil society organizations in Austria. Rather, they provide analytically relevant insights into patterns of support, collaboration, and structural constraints among participants connected to schools and CSO networks. Furthermore, the quantitative findings are based on cross-sectional survey data and therefore indicate associations rather than causal relationships.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how civil society organizations (CSOs) contribute to the educational inclusion of children with refugee and migration backgrounds in Austria, and the structural and contextual factors that shape their efforts. The findings

indicate that CSOs play a central role in supporting both academic and social integration by providing a range of services, including language instruction, homework assistance, psychosocial support, mentoring, intercultural mediation, and advocacy for inclusive school practices. These initiatives help children overcome barriers to equitable participation and foster a sense of belonging within school communities.

CSOs also act as mediators between families, schools, and state institutions, addressing gaps left by formal education systems. They facilitate parental engagement, promote intercultural understanding, and create spaces for children and families to navigate educational structures more effectively. In doing so, CSOs function not merely as service providers, but as integral components of the social infrastructure that sustains educational inclusion.

However, their efforts are constrained by multiple structural limitations, including restrictive asylum policies, delays in labor market access, insufficient recognition of foreign qualifications, reliance on project-based funding, and the scarcity of trained staff. These challenges underscore the precariousness of CSO interventions and highlight the need for systemic support to ensure sustainable inclusion.

In summary, civil society organizations contribute significantly to the educational inclusion of refugee and migrant children in Austria by bridging institutional gaps, promoting equitable participation, and fostering social and academic integration. Yet, their capacity to enact transformative change is shaped by broader political, legal, and resource constraints. Addressing these structural limitations—through policy reform, stable funding, and coordinated support—remains essential to fully realize the potential of CSOs in advancing inclusive education.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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