

Challenging Childhoods: Children in Refugee Shelters

In-depth insight into the challenges, social interactions and adaptive strategies of displaced children residing in refugee shelters in Sweden and Syria.

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Abstract

In this research, we explore how the physical setting within refugee camps contributes to shaping social interactions of displaced children aged 6-12. By examining the spatial and social dimensions of refugee camps / accommodations, we aim to investigate how such challenging environments shape children's social connections and interactions with their communities and surroundings and what adaptive strategies they follow to get by.

We chose to conduct the study across two different settings, Sweden and Syria, since these countries represent two completely different stages of refugees' route to one of their final destinations, Northern Europe. Syria is one of the very first countries refugee people go through, whereas Sweden is one of their final ones, or even the final in many cases. This fact also allowed for both diversity in capturing displaced children's experiences, and a deeper understanding of how different physical environments (camps or accommodations) shape their social interactions. In order to achieve this, we gathered data from those who work daily and closely with children in camps. We conducted semi-structured interviews with camp workers, allowing them to share detailed observations on how camps as physical environments affect children's social interactions. Later on, thematic analysis was applied to the data collected, focusing on the spatial and social dimensions of children's experiences as observed by workers.

We believe this research contributes to child studies by providing insight into the complex experiences of displaced children in refugee camps, through focusing on daily social activities of children who face extreme conditions and challenges that affect all aspects of their lives and exploring their ways of adapting with these settings and practicing agency. We expect our findings to highlight how children adapt within the camp community and, hopefully, provide concrete insights for NGOs, educators, and policymakers working in refugee camps, thus contributing to the creation of supportive environments, responsive to the unique needs of displaced children for well-rounded social interactions.

key words: refugee children, refugee camps, social interaction, Sweden, Syria, adaptive strategies

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1. Introduction

1.1 The refugee crisis

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the end of 2023 an estimated 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. People from different parts of the world have faced challenging journeys as refugees, due to the continually deteriorating political and economic conditions in their countries. They had to flee conflicts, persecution and instability in search of safety and a better life. For most of them, leaving their countries and becoming refugees, seeking a more prosperous future was their only option. From that number there are 47 million children under 18 (40 percent) which underscores an urgent need to address the unique challenges faced by refugee children.

With a continuous worldwide refugee crisis, the need to provide children with living conditions that offer them a healthy living environment which enhances their prospects and well-being has become imperative. Although a large proportion of the refugee children are hosted in housing facilities which promote social integration, with school attendance and involvement in community procedures, there still exists a high number of refugee children (especially the ones in the process of asylum seeking or children displaced within the confines of their own countries, as in the cases of Syrian refugee camps) whose need for social interactions and integration is not covered. These children, living under difficult circumstances within refugee camps with limited space and resources, face far greater challenges in having basic rights such as living in a safe place, going to school, playing, and developing social skills. Unfortunately, these children and their situations are usually underestimated and overlooked.

1.2 Refugees in Sweden and Syria

According to Swedish Migration Agency, statistics show that the number of asylum applicants for people aged less than 18 years reached a peak in 2016. Sweden being then one of the main destinations for refugees, registered slightly more than 12000 of accompanied and unaccompanied asylum applications of children, dropping in 2023 to around 3000 applications.

While Syrian refugee children formed a significant part of the refugees in Sweden, (UNICEF 2023) it is reported that 6.9 million people (3 million children) are internally displaced. The report states that there are 2.4 million children out of school and 1.6 million at risk of dropping out. Even with numbers dropping in Sweden, and with the continuing catastrophic war and the horrific consequences that internally displaced people living in Syria especially children, the challenges remain enormous for providing the basics for children such as a safe home or access to education which is one of the most common means of socialization for children. This lack not only deprives them of academic knowledge but also social skills and the chance to form a rounded, healthy development.

1.3 Children in Camp Environments

According to Sampson and Gifford (2010: 117-118) "it is increasingly understood that 'place matters' when it comes to children's health and well-being". Camp environments have turned from temporary shelters to long-term homes, despite extreme life conditions. These places have become like other social environments where children live and grow. Like any sociocultural settings, camps play a crucial role in shaping children's experiences in forming social interactions, adaptation, and exercising agency. Children in these settings are constantly adapting to the changing circumstances, as Denzin (2010: 2) describes, socialization is "a fluid, shifting relationship between persons attempting to fit their lives in a workable way". This perspective aligns with Kehily (2013: 220): "Children are shaped by the socialization process, but they are also active in their own socializations". This transformation of short-term accommodations in displacement into long term residences makes it essential to study how these places contribute to shaping children's experiences and perspectives and to forming their wellbeing. "The way in which children experience a place can impact their cognitive development, as well as social and motor skills" Weir et al claim. (2023: 503). Further research is needed on how children navigate, adapt, practice their agency and form their relationships within such unique life settings, in order to understand children's perspectives, experiences, thereby create better informed solutions, policies and provide supportive environments that offer children better opportunities to thrive even in challenging environments. Weir et al (2023: 503) underscore that children's displacement has been

studied from several aspects, such as its impact on health or vulnerability to forced marriage, forced labor and child trafficking (UNOCHA 2019). Yet, there is a gap in exploring how children experience those environments and their impact on health and well-being. This is the research problem we set out to explore in this thesis.

1.4 Research problem

Drawing on sociology of childhood, we approach the issue of children's lives in refugee camps from a more child-oriented point of view, trying to map out children's ways of dealing with the specificities of refugee camp physical environments. We focus on children's strategies and how they adapt to the challenges of living in a refugee camp as children. We explore how the physical settings within refugee camps shape displaced children's social interactions but also how children relate to and use the social and physical environment. By examining the spatial and social dimensions of refugee camps, we inquire how they develop strategies to deal with and handle the special conditions of the camp. Furthermore, we attempt to highlight the ways camp spaces, according to the camp type, offer opportunities for children to meet and interact with each other and form a sense of community.

The issue could be studied in different ways. One alternative would be to carry out an ethnographic study, following children's lives in the camps, carry out child interviews, or perhaps interviews with parents in the camps. However, the methodological approaches mentioned above demand time beyond what is possible within the frames of this master thesis. Also, the issue contains a range of ethical challenges. Therefore, we chose to focus on camp workers, who in their daily work interact with and observe children and their lives in the camps.

Given the universal displacement crisis involving many children refugees living an essential part of their lives within refugee camps, it's compelling to explore this area and investigate how children act and relate to the social life and relationships developed within the special circumstances of the camp. Since most of these children are confined within the camps which started as a temporary solution and seem to have turned into a long-term living space, it is these spatial restrictions they have to overcome or alter in order to seek and create social interactions. However, it seems that the impact these places have on the refugee children's social interactions

is usually overlooked in existing literature as the focus is usually on the vulnerability and victimization of these children. Hence, we wish to offer an alternative approach to the issue. To us, it is crucial to have insight on how children actively participate and show agency in developing strategies and socially adapt to challenging environments.

Exploring children's lived experiences through the workers' observations could allow informed decision-making processes to improve life quality in camps and even provide practical aid for better effective support mechanisms for workers within camps.

We believe this study has global relevance and expect our findings to highlight how children adapt within the camp community and, hopefully, provide concrete insights that could foster partnership between children focused organizations, NGOs, educators, and policymakers. This, we hope, contributes to enhancing social well-being and improves the lives of displaced children worldwide, thus contributing to the creation of supportive environments and meeting the unique needs of those vulnerable children.

We would also like to note that while our research is conducted within two different countries, we do not intend to carry out a comparative study and under no circumstances provide any type of comparison between the policies of these countries. Instead, our focus remains on children's lived experiences in camps context and how these contexts shape their social interactions. The two different contexts offer a broader spectrum of examples of how children's lives in refugee camps can play out and contain, with cases showing both differences and similarities.

1.5 Why is this study child studies related?

Drawing on Child Studies, the focus of our study is to capture children's daily experiences and perspectives and investigate refugee camp environment and power dynamics. We use the camp workers' experiences and observations in order to obtain a deeper understanding and contribute to the presentation of social and cultural diversity of children's lives, as previous research emphasizes the diversity of childhood experiences that is shaped by different social, political and structural contexts (Woodhead, 2009: 20). Also, the interdisciplinary approach we are following not only navigates social interactions within a specific cultural context but also examines the role of play

in shaping social relationships and hopefully provides insights for more supportive policies for children. Additionally, exploring the educational opportunities offered to children and addressing the challenges of the educational process proves that our research is relevant to Child studies.

Moreover, our focus on children's experiences in refugee camps aligns with the idea in childhood sociology that "childhood is understood as a social construction" (James & Prout, 1997: 7). Defining childhood as a social construction implies an alternative view on childhood. Instead of focusing on children's biopsychosocial development, which is common perspective in developmental psychology and pediatric studies on children, a social constructivist approach to childhood offers an interpretive frame for contextualizing children's lives and activities in their own right, beyond the developmental dimension, and discussed in relation to the specific structural and cultural component of the social context in which they grow up in and are part of (James & Prout, 1997: 7)

Furthermore, by investigating the ways children adapt and navigate their environment, claim agency and change the space they live within in order to meet their needs, we reflect on James and Prout statement that "children... are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives" (1997: 8). Thus, children are approached as beings, worth a study in their own right, beyond developmental perspectives, exploring what they do and how they act and relate to the social and cultural context they meet in their daily life.

2. Aim and research questions

2.1 Aim

Our main aim is to understand in more detail the complexities of children's social activities, friendships and participation in community life in the confined living spaces of refugee camps. We, furthermore, seek to understand the adaptive strategies children apply to cope with and utilize their physical environment. By examining how children respond to their surroundings, this research aims to provide insight into the interplay between refugee camp spatial design and social interactions. The goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations for creating environments that could serve children's social interactions and integration in these transnational areas.

To achieve this aim, we investigate through the observations of the camp workers the influence that the physical environments of refugee camps have on the ability of displaced children to create social interactions and adapt to these environments, as well as what mechanisms they tend to employ in order to facilitate this adaptation.

2.2 Research Questions

In this study, we attempt to answer various question concerning refugee children residing in camps, their relation to other people as well as their spatial and social environment and the way they use it or alter it in order to cover their need for social interaction and development.

Our overarching question is *How do displaced children, in their daily lives and social interactions, relate to the physical and social environment of the refugee camp?*

Other, more specific questions we wish to answer are the following:

What strategies do children in refugee camps employ in their social interactions, in relation to the specificities of the physical environments? This question aims to discover how children act in relation to their physical surroundings, as well as how they adapt in order to form their social interactions.

How are the available facilities (e.g., recreational, educational) within the camps used by children in their group activities and social gatherings? This question helps us understand the influence of camp facilities on group activities and the children's social interactions, in terms of play, social gatherings, group activities etc.

3. Previous research

The study of refugee children's experiences within displacement environments, such as camps or refugee accommodations, is a growing field that encompasses various aspects of their social interactions, adaptive strategies and interactions with space. This review of existing literature highlights themes from various foundational qualitative studies and demonstrates how our research builds upon these themes to achieve our aim, drawing inspiration from previous works of various types of academic texts. The literature reviewed contains a book by Watters (2000), a scoping review by Weir et al. (2023), a presentation of a collection of articles by Ní Laoire et al. (2010) as well as a dissertation by Karlsson (2021) and draws on three themes. The first theme is social interactions and belonging, the second social dynamics and interactions with space, and finally adaptive strategies and agency.

3.1 Social Interactions and Belonging

Sandra Karlsson's dissertation, "Children's Lived Rights: The Everyday Politics of Asylum-Seeking Children" offers insights into how children in refugee accommodations interact and adapt with each other and with their surroundings in these settings. Through conducting a yearlong ethnographic study of children aged 6-12 in a Swedish asylum center Karlsson explores these children's social dynamics among each other and with their environment while dealing with the restrictions imposed by asylum politics. Karlsson's research is of a political nature, focusing on how asylum policies influence the day-to-day experiences of children, especially in terms of their opportunities for play and access to safe living conditions. Karlsson discusses how asylum policies limit children's opportunities for play and safe living conditions: "The second study focuses on children's politics of play, manifested in what I have called their play tactics in the asylum center's strongly regulated time-space" (Karlsson, 2021: 86). Our research, on the other hand, investigates the social aspects of how children interact daily and adapt in refugee shelters rather than the politics surrounding asylum policies.

Weir, Khan and Marmot have carried out a scoping review of research concerned with displaced children's experiences with their surroundings and interactions with one another in their study titled "Displaced Children's Experience of Places and Play; A Scoping Review." This review provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on displaced children's interactions with their environments, examines how displaced children deal with their surroundings and explores existing literature to pinpoint research gaps to enhance understanding of how children experience places and play within different settlements. Weir et al. focus on social interactions of children within displacement environment. For example, they state that "children develop relationships with peers through play, and the lack of opportunities for children to play affects their social connections with other families from their country of origin" (Weir et al. 2023: 510). Naudeau (2005) in particular, emphasize the importance of interactions facilitated through play in child friendly spaces (CFS) and stress that play and recreation are crucial for the children's well-being in refugee camps alongside basic needs like food, shelter and healthcare (2005: 52). Additionally, Weir et al. (2023: 503) discuss the importance of place attachment to the children's social as well as mental prosperity. Becoming attached to a new environment offers a sense of stability, empowering the establishment of personal relationships, reinforcing the child's well-being, since in order to facilitate an encouraging environment within the community, with healthy social interactions it is essential to preserve a sense of belonging. Our research builds on these insights by focusing specifically on the social interactions within refugee accommodations, offering a more detailed examination of daily social dynamics and living conditions.

In their research presented in "Introduction; Childhood and Migration – Mobilities, Homes and Belongings" Caitríona Ní Laoire, Fina Carpena Méndez, Naomi Tyrrell and Allen White (2010) highlight the significance of understanding how migrant children establish belongings and connections through migration and mobility. They emphasize that conducting research on children who migrate enhances our understanding of how they form attachments (Ní Laoire et al., 2010: 156). Building on this idea, our research narrows the focus to the specific context of refugee accommodations, aiming to present deeper insights into how children experience living daily and form social connections in these environments.

Charles Watters (2000) in his work "Refugee Children; Towards the Next Horizon" examines a review of literature that highlights the significance of social interactions for refugee children. He

discusses how these children alter through their surroundings and the socio-political contexts that shape their lives. Watters points out that children's relationships with others, their belongings, and their interactions, with places are "fluid, contextual, and mobile" (Watters, 2000: 10).

Additionally, Watters highlights the importance of understanding the physical and social environments that refugee children inhabit. However, we should mention that unlike Watters' broader and more varied theoretical contexts, our research specifically explores the social interactions within refugee accommodations, focusing on the daily interactions and adaptive strategies of children allows which allows us to add detailed insights into the specific context.

3.2 Social Interactions and Space

Wessells and Kostelny (2013: 31-32) extensively study the significance of child spaces (CFS) and play areas in refugee camps. They underscore the importance of CFS as zones that provide protected environments where children can participate in activities, play, learn and socialize supporting their emotional well-being in displacement. Furthermore, Weir et al. (2023: 510) emphasize the significant role of play and the opportunities for play in helping children adjust to new environments in the displacement. Woolley also highlights how resourceful children are in creating their playing areas even when none are available officially (2021: 10) demonstrating this way their resilience and imagination. This specific aspect has been thoroughly explored through our detailed interviews, providing rich insights into the daily lives and experiences of these children.

Weir et al. (2023: 503, 509, 512) comment that although the consequences of displacement on children are discussed in literature, very little light has been shed on the children's daily experience and adaptability to the new place they live in. The authors also mention that most of the studies included in the review failed to offer a holistic view on the children's experiences of place, focusing on "placed" children, rather than "displaced" ones. Thus, Weir et al (2023: 512) call for further research on children's adaptations to both new and original life settings, pointing out that there are "very few studies that holistically explore displaced children's experiences of place".

Accordingly, our research aims to further explore how children adapt and utilize spaces to socialize in refugee accommodations and to get their perspectives regarding this experience.

Ní Laoire et al in their study in 2010, emphasized how children's social interactions with their environment demonstrate that the concept of home can be redefined in terms of movement. Their qualitative study argues that home should be understood as "reconceptualized in terms of movement" (Ní Laoire et al., 2010: 157). While this study offers a perspective on how children engage with spaces in various settings, our research investigates the specific environment of refugee accommodations shedding light on how children navigate and adjust to their immediate surroundings and even change it to meet their daily social needs.

Watters (2000) outlines how refugee children adjust their living spaces to suit their needs often resulting in self-made changes and self-made regulation of space. His review highlights that self-made adjustment and self-management of space are common in refugee camps and often lead to tensions with authorities (Watters, 2000: 18). In our study we focus on the adaptive methods employed by children within refugee accommodations offering detailed insights into their daily interactions with space.

3.3 Adaptive Strategies and Agency

The study "Displaced children's experience of places and play." by Weir et al. (2023) underscores resilience and flexibility of children in creating their play areas even within challenging environments. Their scoping review states that "children can be inventive in finding places for playing creatively and freely, even if none are formally provided, and despite an inadequate environment" (Weir et al., 2023: 507). This is a characteristic we share with this research, exploring children's adaptive strategies and the agency they demonstrated finding and creating spaces according to their needs within limited settings such as refugee camps and accommodations in Syria and in Sweden.

Karlsson's work emphasizes the political agency of children in asylum accommodations and how institutional regulations limit their interactions and ability to express themselves and to claim

agency within these situations. The author provides valuable perspectives to a better understanding on social dynamics and resilience among children living in refugee accommodations (Karlsson, 2021: 78, 95). She also highlights children's ability to navigate the constraints imposed by these policies noting that "children actively negotiate their identities and belongings in settings indicating that children experience mobility, disruption and living in multiple places" (Karlsson, 2021: 159). While we share studying children's experiences and the adaptive strategies they develop to overcome difficulties with Karlsson, our research focuses on sociological approach that centers children's daily experiences and interactions from their own viewpoints rather than getting into the political analysis of asylum policies.

Ní Laoire et al. (2010) also underlines the agency of children in adapting to their circumstances by highlighting how migrant children actively negotiate their identities and belongings across situations. The study points out that children's lives are marked by mobility, disruption and multilocality, and within these dynamic settings children exhibit agency by creating a sense of belonging and identity through their interactions with their environments. They mention that "children actively shape their identities and connections in settings emphasizing that children's lives are influenced by movement, disruptions and being in multiple places" (Ní Laoire et al., 2010: 159). Moreover, Ní Laoire et al. (2010) point out that "children are not passive recipients of culture, socialization and identity but they are subjective beings and are actively involved in shaping their own sociocultural worlds" (p. 156). However, since the fact of child migrancy remains quite invisible (Ní Laoire et al., 2010: 156) in the Western world, acknowledging this characteristic highlights how children's social connections, sense of belonging, and relations to places are dynamic and adaptable. It is then crucial, as Ní Laoire et al. propose, to investigate the children's views when researching their lives in order to roundly understand how they form the notions of home and belonging in the state of mobility (p. 159). Our study builds on this by investigating the strategies children use to adapt within refugee shelters as a living environment for them.

Watters (2008) suggests adopting a more innovative view where refugee children mediate the effects of past traumatic experiences employing "personal and collective strategies," thus becoming agentic to their own lives and experiences, turning from vulnerability to resilience (p. 25) instead of dealing with refugee children as vulnerable victims of devastating circumstances and focusing on the effects of socioeconomic and political issues. The author explores the

strategies employed by refugee children to deal with challenging living conditions highlighting their resilience and creativity and provides an example of how "residents there had to combat both the scorching midday sun and rainwater threatening their tents and possessions during storms" (Watters, 2000: 18). Our study provides a more focused examination of these adaptive strategies within the specific context of refugee accommodations, highlighting the ingenuity and resourcefulness of these children in their daily lives.

3.4 Concluding Notes on Previous Research

The existing literature provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding how physical environments impact the social interactions of displaced children in refugee camps and the strategies they apply to adapt with each environment. While foundational studies like those by Karlsson (2021), Weir et al. (2023), Ní Laoire et al. (2010) and Watters (2000) presented above offer broad theoretical and contextual insights, our research aims to provide a detailed, context-specific examination of children's social interactions and adaptive strategies within refugee accommodations. It also wishes to contribute to a deeper understanding of life in refugee camps by adding depth to the existing literature and offer insights for improving the well-being of displaced children through better-designed environments and supportive social structures.

4. Method

4.1 Semi-structured interviews

The study required qualitative data to provide in-depth descriptions of children's social interactions, as described by camp workers and educators who interact with children regularly, such as NGO's workers and educators within camps. The interviews, as our means of data collection, focused on practical details concerning children's daily routines and procedures throughout the day as observed by the workers. It should be stated that since the actual perspectives of children were difficult to acquire due to the research limitations described below, we tried to focus on the descriptions of the workers and their observations. This data collection underscored children's social interactions within different physical spaces of the camp/shelter in addition to the impact of the camp's physical environment and design on children's ability to engage with peers and participate in communal activities. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as it is recommended when more than one person is involved in field work and certainly as it offers flexibility adapting to the experiences of participants since they can express their thoughts freely, allowing in-depth answers (Clark et al, 2021: 428). We interviewed NGOs camp workers in Syria and Sweden whom we reached through personal connections.

The transcription of the interviews started as soon as we conducted the first one, to avoid an overwhelming amount of unprocessed data, as advised by Clarke et al. (2021). However, before this step was implemented, the interviews had to be translated into English first so that they could be accessible by both researchers.

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyze, generate codes and identify themes and the data relevant to each theme (Clark et al., 2021: 538-539). This method was chosen as the most suitable one since it is flexible and can provide deeper understanding and rich and detailed data on our research objectives.

We decided to follow the thematic analysis form suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013 as cited in Clarke et al. 2021: 538) which includes six distinct stages: "familiarization, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and

evidencing themes". During our data analysis we looked for the elements Ryan and Bernard (2003, as cited in Clarke et al. 2021: 539) indicates: "repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data as well as theory-related material", paying attention mostly to repetition which is described by Clarke et al. (2021: 539) as one of the most prominent ways of themes emerging, as long as the repeated data is connected to the initial questions of the study.

4.2 Data collection procedure

The initial plan was to conduct research along Sweden and Greece instead of Sweden and Syria. However, the procedure of finding participants in Greece was overwhelming, bringing the study to an initial halt. NGOs and state organizations were either unwilling to provide access to their facilities and workers or never replied to our invitations. We managed to find some willing participants mainly through personal connections and even gained access to the Red Cross Association who work with refugees at the remaining camps in Greece but all of them focused on working with unaccompanied minors, mainly teenagers residing in different shelter facilities other than camps, or in distinct areas within the refugee camps but they were not children living with their families. However, it should be stated that the situation concerning refugee camps in Greece is a shifting one, a fact that contributed to the obstacles we met.

While we continued our attempts to find participants in Greece, in Sweden the procedure went more smoothly. The initial contact was established through personal connections who brought us in touch with workers in "Save the Children" in Sweden around Skåne region. Each potential participant received an email with a brief explanation of the research, the interviewing procedure as well as confidentiality matters. These contacts helped connect with field workers directly involved with children in the settings under consideration, since people who did not want to participate in the study or did not feel relevant to it often referred us to other colleagues. Following initial email contact, which typically received responses within ten days, potential participants expressed their willingness to contribute to the study. These participants were primarily field workers and staff from various asylum accommodations across Sweden who work directly with children. The interviews were conducted on-line via Zoom and WhatsApp, in order to facilitate all

participants' convenience and availability and the languages used were Swedish and English. All interviews were transcribed with the interviews in Swedish being translated into English.

However, the obstacles in Greece were not overcome. At this point and while interviews in Sweden were being taken, we were able to contact Abjad, an NGO doing educational initiatives for children in camps in the northern part of Syria. The contact was initiated through personal relationships with two of the organization's main trustees and further connections with the workers were facilitated. It is really compelling to us to have access to refugee camps in this region since this area is one of the first steps of the refugees' long journey to the Western World. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the participants were eager to take part in the study since they believe that the refugees' who live in the part of the world stories are not being heard enough in the Western world, something that encouraged us and placed upon us some personal responsibility to offer them a platform to speak and share the refugee children's experiences and voices.

The interviews were conducted online in Arabic, via Zoom and WhatsApp. Nevertheless, due to the harsh conditions concerning internet connection on the Syrian part, the interviews were interrupted on some occasions but, thankfully, this problem was overcome. They lasted for approximately 40-60 each. They were then translated into English and then transcribed for the needs of the study. Interviews in Sweden tended to be faster since most of the participants had limited time available, with the opposite being the case in Syria: participants there were available for as much time as needed and were really passionate about sharing stories and experiences, often expressing that they felt they were not being heard enough on the Western world.

We managed to perform 7 interviews in total, 4 in Syria and 3 in Sweden, with one in Sweden involving two participants.

4.3 Comments on the data collection procedure

One of our main concerns that arose during the data collection procedure was the fact that only Ola Sobh (OS) would be able to conduct the interviews, since the part of Greece was finally excluded. The interviews were to be implemented in Swedish and Arabic and this fact made it impossible for Areti Frementiti (AF) to participate, speaking none of the above languages. It was preferred by the participants that they were interviewed in the language they were most familiar

with, so that linguistic problems could be prevented, and free expression be encouraged. However, this decision left OS, who speaks Arabic and Swedish, alone during the interviewing procedure. The interviews then had to be transcribed and translated in English -a strenuous and time-consuming procedure- so that they could be processed by both researchers. This fact left a feeling of isolation to the interviewer, since having a partner through the actual procedure of the interviewing could have helped in tolerating emotional and work stress and could have also contributed by offering feedback on the procedure and the data being collected. Nevertheless, since the first interviews were translated and transcribed so both of us could have access and process the data, the second partner was able to act as a supporter in the background during the whole procedure, offering useful feedback on the quality of data gathered as well as guidance throughout the remaining interviews.

However, there was a lot to gain due to the fact that the interviewer was a native Arabic speaker since OS was able to fully understand all the cultural and place-specific references and have a deeper understanding of the discussion. In addition to being familiar with the culture, OS, the interviewer also presented another unique characteristic: she, herself, had been a Syrian refugee in Sweden and therefore able to fully understand the context and details of the refugee situation as well as respect the refugees' cultural sensitivity. Also, her background refrained her from asking more questions to clear specific issues, since she was familiar with such references and no further clarification of the context was needed.

Last but not least, during some of the interviews it became apparent that it would be difficult to extract answers that did not contain the interviewees' own personal experiences, comments and views. In some cases, the questions had to be modified in order to receive answers about the children's perspectives and their descriptions and the focus of the interviews had to be changed again and again as participants tended to express their own opinions and beliefs rather than descriptions and observations. This fact in some cases resulted in longer interviews so that the data needed could be collected, altering the initial questions or repeating parts of them. Also, some questions were finally omitted since the answers were considered obvious. Nevertheless, allowing the interviewees to follow their own route answering a question and not intervening resulted in the narrative of very interesting, moving stories about the children and the situation in the refugee

camps, a fact that granted us a deeper insight on the issue. Some of the stories are presented in this study.

4.4 The participants

In Sweden, all participants (note: alias names are used) were from Save the Children organization. Sami used to volunteer for Save the Children in Sweden, while at the same time being a refugee himself in the same camp he volunteered, thus having an informed insight into the situation within the accommodation. He is currently an activity leader, organizing activities for children in temporary distribution centers before them being resettled to their permanent location. The second interview in Sweden included two interviewees, Lina and Sara who both volunteer at a refugee accommodation in Southern Sweden as the activity facilitators of the accommodation's activity room for children, having the responsibility to operate the room, organize its environment and materials as well as various leisure activities. Finally, Clara is a volunteer at the Save the Children organization and operates the activity room in one of the refugee shelters in.

As far as the Syrian part is concerned, all four participants are teachers who work for ABJAD organization. Saeed is an education supervisor over four schools in four different camps, whereas the remaining three participants are teachers who work at the unofficial school of one of these camps under Saeed's supervision. Fadi teaches the 6-year-old children, Farah is the school's principal and at the same time teaches the 10 to 11-year-old children. Lastly, Salam teaches 8- to 9-year-old students.

4.5 Ethics

With the beginning of developing the idea of this study, came the ethical considerations too. The issue of the refugee children was one we both shared interest in, and the decision to carry along this path was made instantly.

However, one of the first limitations we were highly concerned about was the fact that access to refugee children would be both difficult to gain as well as controversial in many environments, something that would lead the research to a halt. Nevertheless, instead of leaving this topic once

again under-investigated, we decided to proceed with camp workers, being aware of the restrictions this choice would have upon our research since we were planning to get children's experiences through interviewing adults. This choice, while being a practical one, could create challenges in capturing children's voices and perspectives. Nevertheless, the interviews focused on children's daily actions and strategies in their lives as these are pictured by the camp workers based on their experiences of working in the camps. The workers were asked to primarily describe what they see and observe in their daily work with the children in the camps, rather than focus on their personal opinions and values about the camps and the situation of the children. This procedure proved to be more strenuous than anticipated since in various cases it was difficult to receive focused answers. In many cases, the participants were overwhelmed by their willingness to inform us on the children's circumstances within the refugee camps, which also encompassed their personal aspirations and opinions. By re-arranging the focus of the interview and our initial questions repeatedly and highlighting the importance of focusing on children's perspectives again and again, we were finally able to extract responses that reflected the minors' voices and experience to the highest possible amount. Once again it should be stated that although our goal is to capture descriptions of the daily routines and strategies of refugee children through the eyes of the workers without any personal comments, aspects, opinions and beliefs, it is still the workers' descriptions and observations that we are going to look into, wishing to capture children's perspective through this lens. Hence, it seems to be the only way at this point to capture the children's perspectives too.

Another important matter we had to take into consideration was confidentiality and anonymity. In order to avoid sensitive data collection as requested by the program, we designed our research accordingly. We preserved the confidentiality and anonymity of the camp workers and the children they referred to, by ensuring that any data that identified any of them was omitted and no personal data of the children or camp workers aware requested. In the cases of accidental reference, the specific data was not transcribed. We also used alias names where necessary to protect all direct participants, thus the camp workers or indirect ones, such as the children or their parents (Clark et al, 2021: 124).

In addition, we paid careful attention to obtaining informed consent before the interviews by presenting an informed consent sheet to be signed after having explained clearly the study aims, any potential impacts and risks to both participants and the children they discuss about (Clark et

al, 2021: 117), and make sure that they understand their rights, particularly the permission to withdraw from the interview any time without any negative consequences (Clark et al, 2021: 120). The consent form was also translated into Arabic for the participants of the Syrian part. We also continuously reflected on the research process acknowledging power dynamics that might influence the interpretation of the data collected.

We feel that the above ethical considerations, carefully taken into account, helped us to elevate our study to the higher possible level for our first attempt as researchers and enabled us to question and assess ourselves throughout the whole procedure of organizing, conducting and writing this study. We hope that this ongoing reflection is apparent to our work and has improved our thoughts and conclusions.

4.6 Analytical procedure

To identify themes in our collected data, we started by extensively reading the transcripts multiple times, familiarizing ourselves with the content. During the reading of the transcripts, we took notes of key phrases and quotes that seemed significant and frequently mentioned in the interviews, considering the context they were mentioned in. We reviewed the data based on how relevant they are to our research question and aim, how well they describe children's perspectives and experiences, in addition to carefully avoiding participants personal opinions. Through this detailed analysis we identified the emerging themes that were strongly visible across the transcripts and notes regarding children's living environments and social interactions and adaptation, which are presented below.

5. Analysis

At the beginning of our data analysis and for a more thorough understanding of it, we would like once again to note the differences between the shelter structures where refugees and displaced people reside in Syria and Sweden. In Sweden, refugees' accommodations are usually repurposed buildings such as old facilities or closed hotels that are rented or managed by the Migration Agency. These places are scattered across the country, either close to city centers and easy to access or more isolated. They can be in good or poor condition, but all have access to essential services, such as safety, hot water, electricity and so on. On the other hand, in Syria displaced people camps are situated in an open land occupied by fabric tents that are built on soil with little infrastructure, without any type of permanent buildings or roads. Also, they offer very limited access to essential services, making daily life challenging and often unsafe.

5.1 Environment – Challenging living conditions

The first theme that emerged was the hard living conditions within all studied camps, whether they were located in European or Asian grounds. The different living conditions described across different shelter environments emphasize a severe lack of basic amenities and resources.

In the shelter types that are located within buildings in Sweden, the problem of space and limited resources becomes apparent. Clara highlights the limited space available within the shelter: "*The environment is very limited*", "*The space is very limited*" as well as the absence of basic furniture except bunk beds: "*there are not even tables or chairs in the rooms*". Similarly, Sara and Lina describe a "*miserable*", "*not inviting environment*" in an "*old, closed hotel*" that was turned into a refugee shelter, where children reside in packed rooms with minimum furniture as well: "*In the rooms where they live, there are two bunk beds and hardly a chair*", having to sleep on "*narrow, thin mattresses*", thus describing an unwelcoming and uncomfortable setting, where children are confined within the building walls mainly, as Sami notes: "*It's very negative because children under a certain age can't go outside the hotel to play*".

However, on the refugee camps located in open spaces in Syria the challenges of the environment are of different nature. All the interviewees highlighted the harsh environmental/weather conditions in the camps which, combined with the fact that refugees live in tents, worsen the standard of living even further. The large amount of rainfall in the winter as well as the high temperatures in summer contribute to the creation of mud and dust/heat respectively. Saeed notes that *"the roads are bad in winter due to mud, requiring constant cleaning. In summer, there's dust and the same suffering but in reverse"* with the same being mentioned by Fadi: *"The weather conditions are harsh, with mud in the rainy season and extreme heat in the summer"*, Salam: *"In winter, floods, mud are the most common problems"*, *"In summer, they complain about the hot weather"* and Farah as well: *"During heavy rains, the roads flood between the tents. Children playing outside or going to school get soaked up till their knees"*, *"In summer, it's very hot"*. The children have to deal with the difficult conditions of their daily lives, with their health and well-being as well as emotional state being severely affected. It is interesting to note a story Farah shared which underscores the impact these conditions have on children:

This girl arrived crying to the class, she was all covered in red mud and she was very upset and sad she said when I asked her what happened, I fell on the way here, my clothes were very clean, my mom will be very upset please tell her what happened so she doesn't punish me.

Nevertheless, the environment is not the only challenge refugee children in these camps have to face. The problem of overcrowding and limited space re-appears in the interviewees' answers repeatedly. Saeed states that children complain about the limited space available: *"They express the difficult life in tents in winter and summer, and how small it is"* and both Farah and Fadi underline the fact that the camp is overcrowded: *"There is overcrowding"*, *"The refugee camp is crowded"*, with Fadi also commenting on the space-restricted areas: *"All areas are narrow"*, *"Limitations in space"*. Another aspect of over-crowdedness is the loss of privacy and personal space, as Salam notes: *"The tents are so close that people can hear each other's conversations there is no privacy at all"*. Overall, the fact that the camps are overcrowded as well as the absence of privacy contribute to the discomfort during both winter and summer.

Not only do all the above living conditions create an unhygienic and unsafe environment, putting refugee children's and parents' health at potential risk, but they also affect the children's psychological well-being and their safety as well. The environment inside tents, as Saeed states, is described as "boring" and having a "*bad atmosphere*", leading the children to leave their tents at every opportunity given. In addition, the children's confinement within their rooms or tents causes safety issues due to supervision rules causing friction between the residents and the Migration department or the other residents as well. As Sami notes:

The children sometimes annoyed other residents because they were playing in the corridors or on their phones. The migration department would intervene if they saw the children in the corridors, strongly advising the parents that they couldn't let the children out in the hotel or to the open rooms without supervision.

Moreover, the overall development of refugee children is also severely affected by the conditions described above. In a noteworthy recollection, Farah talks about a visit she had from a refugee mother and her young daughter who was born and has lived all her life in the refugee camp. During the visit at Farah's house, the child was impressed by the kitchen sink, something that she had never seen before:

One day, a friend from the camp with her daughter visited me in my house, the girl asked, "What is that?" as she touched a door and started moving it. She didn't know what a kitchen sink was. At that moment, the mom was devastated. She remembered her big house which had been left and realized that her child didn't know the most basic things. The tents around them everywhere. It's their basic right have homes. These kids don't know the simplest things because they grew up in tents.

This incident highlights the profound effect of these factors on children's general basic experiences and knowledge as well as the extent of deprivation and lack of normalcy in the children refugees' lives, since this lack of basic living standards can put their overall development and understanding of the world in risk. It is what Fadi, in his attempt to describe the effects of the conditions on the children, states powerfully: "*The camp environment leaves a visible trace on the children's faces and feet*" which can be understood both literally and metaphorically.

5.2 The environment for children

5.2.1 Lack of child-friendly spaces

Another major issue that emerged during our research was the restriction or even the total absence of child-friendly spaces within shelter environments, where children could spend their time, play and socialize with their peers, freely and safely. This fact was highlighted by all interviewees, both in Sweden and in Syria.

In Sweden, Clara notes the existence of a playroom but comments that it is open only for limited time during the week, when there are available volunteers to supervise it: *"The playroom is the only facility for children here, but it's only open when volunteers are present. There's no consistent access to it"*. The rest of the facility is characterized as *"very limited and not child friendly"*. Clara goes on to note that other than the playroom, *"The accommodation lacks indoor spaces specially for bad weather"*, with the two nearby parks being far away from the shelter: *"Outside, there are two parks about a ten-minute walk away, but nothing closer"*. In accordance with Clara, Sami states that before the creation of a respective playroom in the shelter, *"it wasn't a child-friendly environment"* either, but other than that *"they don't have a proper place to play"*, since the playroom once again operates for a limited time, leaving the children *"most of their day in the rooms or in the corridors"*. Sara and Lina underline that except for the playroom, which is open at specific times within the week, there are no other places for children to play. Even the grassy area outside the shelter *"is not nice"* since authorities *"haven't done much like football goal or something"* in these outdoors areas so children could play. Clara notes how much the children love the only existing playroom, something highlighted by the other interviewees' remarks that the children usually spend time outside the playroom waiting eagerly for the volunteers to come and open it. Sami says that *"they are waiting for the room to open. They might be curious about when it will open or who will come"* whereas Sara and Lina inform us that *"we see them getting very happy when they see us. There are children who stand and wait outside the door"* and continues by sharing that children find it hard to leave the room when they have to: *"it's hard for them to leave, they say they want to stay more to play"*.

In Syria, as Fadi informs us, only *"few camps have child-friendly spaces, games, and green areas to play"* and the camp he works in is one of the many which lack such facilities: *"the camp has no place to play"*, as it is the case with Salam: *"There are no specific areas for children"*. However, as Farah notes, although there are no designated child-friendly places in the camp where she works:

Interviewer: *Are there child-friendly spaces for them to gather?*

Farah: *No, there aren't.*

There is an activity room within school *"with balls and other entertainment items"* where children *"often request to go to"* as well as an *"area with soft cement ground for playing"*. In Saeed's school, even if *"there is no playground in school to spend time at Al Yaraa' School"* there is an *"activity tent which is poorly equipped with minimum furniture and lights but lacks essential components"*. Two other schools, he continues, *"have dusty playgrounds full of stones"*.

The lack of common, child-friendly places leaves the children confined to corridors and rooms in the case of Sweden, as indicated by Clara: *"Children mostly stay within their families or with friends in the corridors or rooms"*, Sami: *"So they stay most of their day in the rooms or in the corridors"*, and Sara and Lina: *"We actually don't see anyone outside the rooms"*, or tents, narrow spaces outside the tents and fields or farms as far as Syria is concerned: Saeed: *"you see them everywhere between tents, roads, small squares between tents"*, Fadi: *"children here gather in front of school or between tents and on the roads that are 3 to 4 meters wide"*, Salam: *"There are empty fields and agricultural farms nearby where they can play between the trees"* and Farah: *"They play between the tents or in the mountains around this camp"*. This limited access to child-friendly spaces leads children to spending their time in such inadequate spaces, endangering their safety since these places lack the necessary infrastructure to support safe activities. Saeed also describes the cases of some schools which have *"dusty playgrounds full of stones"*, often being hazardous, putting the children in great risk of injury, something that has happened in one of them, with two children *"injured and had broken arm or leg"*, thus leading to their removal of the equipment due to safety concerns. Fadi also brings up the issue of safety, discussing that when children gather in the narrow streets *"if a motorcycle or a car passes it jeopardizes their safety"*. These conditions not only prevent children from playing freely but also expose them to constant danger.

Apart from the safety issues, lack of such places affects the children's social development since the restriction they face limits their opportunities for social interaction and creative play, especially in the case of Sweden. As Clara states, *"in this accommodation there is no common place at all"*, restricting the interaction between peers or other people in the shelter. Sami also points out that the lack of such places often leads the children to sitting on chairs, playing on mobile phones: *"unfortunately, many sat on chairs played on mobile phones"*, thus limiting the opportunities for active, social interaction even further. According to Sara and Lina, what adds to the not child-friendly and inadequate environment for social interaction is the presence of guards, since *"there are guards everywhere, and it might be a bit scary"*, so children tend to stay confined within their rooms with their social development being jeopardized.

5.2.2 Routine, Organized activities, Schooling and Educational challenges

The two different types of refugee shelters present completely different opportunities for schooling, highlighting the complex realities faced by children in transient and refugee situations.

In Sweden, where the refugee shelters are a type of temporary accommodation, *"children are not engaged in any formal education"* as Clara informs us, since the refugees living in the shelter *"do not yet have a stable address and personal number, which is needed to enroll in school"*, leading them to being out of education, missing on both educational opportunities and opportunities for socialization. Sami also confirms that there is no official type of in-camp schooling: *"not in official way"*, noting that the children express their wish to attend school: *"The children love to go to school, and they express that often"*. Sara and Lina, however, note the existence of a nearby school where refugee children could go to, but underlines that the fact that parents do not know how long their stay in the shelter is going to last prevents them from enrolling their children: *"There is a school here in area, and there is an opportunity for these children to go to school. But if the parents don't really know how long they will stay here, they don't enroll the children in school here in Swedish school"*. Consequently, *"they are waiting without any schooling"*. Even some attempts to organize Swedish classes within the playroom failed due to the children's unwillingness to sacrifice their play time for lessons, as Clara comments: *"We tried to organize some Swedish lessons, but children just wanted to play in this very short time when the room is open"*.

Not only schooling is not offered in the refugee shelters in Sweden, but there seems to be a lack of routine and organized activities too. Clara informs us that the fact that the shelter is a temporary settlement prevents children from creating routines: *"so children don't really get to create routines"*. She explains that children *"start to get used to the place and then they are moved by a decision of the Migration agency"* since *"the families move in and out all the time here"* adding that *"The only consistent part of their daily routine is mealtimes"*. There is also a lack of organized activities outside the working hours of the respective activity rooms, described above. Clara states that *"the only planned activity is within the playroom which is open twice a week"*. As a result, refugee children in the shelters in Sweden miss out on an ordinary daily life, with the appropriate routine and schedule which would benefit their overall well-being and socialization.

Interestingly, schooling, education and routine are quite different in Syria, where refugee camps have turned out to be permanent residences. All interviewees work in schools located within the camps and most (if not all) children attend school, whether they live near or far from the school, hence this creates a specific routine for the children throughout the day. As Fadi notes: *"Children within the camp environment, whether they are near or far, attend school"*, adding that school seems to be the children's *"most pleasant place"*, since it represents a place where they can gather and play. The schools are constructed with cement walls and fabric roofs, something confirmed by Salam: *"tents and half-tents, with tent fabric curtains for roofs and cement walls"*, Farah: *"The school is constructed with cement walls and tent fabric roofs"* and Saeed: *"a cement wall to a specific height, with the roof being a tent material fabric"*. The schedule is divided in two shifts, a morning and an afternoon/evening one, as mentioned by all interviewees: Saeed: *"Al Yaraa' School has two shifts"*, Fadi: *"We have morning and evening shifts"*, Salam: *"We have two shifts, the morning one from 8-12:20 and the afternoon shift from 12:30-5 pm"* and Farah: *"The school we work is in shifts and children are divided to morning group and afternoon group"*.

Most of the schools have limited space and very few resources. Fadi notes that *"the school is very basic and unprocessed"* and comments on the space limitation that *"the activities are few and restricted because of the limited space."*, leading them to opting for activities *"that do not require or consume many resources"*. Saeed informs us that *"the school is equipped with basic items like solar panels for internet and lighting"*, having even a language laboratory with tables, but goes on to admit that *"there aren't enough devices or time for all"* which leads them to choosing *"the most*

vulnerable students and offer them the chance to use the tablets as an incentive for learning". Nevertheless, it seems that not all schools are on a similar level as far as space and resources are concerned. Farah states that they do have an "6 or 8 meters long and 4 meters wide" activity room in the school she works at, "with balls and other entertainment items", "a big wooden table", a floor of "colored cork puzzle squares" as well as "a board to draw on". They also have "an area with soft cement ground for playing" where students can do sports. Furthermore, when they needed a larger classroom to better accommodate the number of students, she was able to receive one: "I changed the classroom to a larger class because the previous one was small" and now, she comments, "they have space to sit better and write".

However, although schools in the Syrian part do exist (either with very limited or with more resources and space), there is a variety of obstacles and educational challenges these refugee students need to overcome, with the most prominent one being weather and environment conditions and the long distance many students have to walk under these conditions, as Farah notes: *"they struggle with going to school sometimes walking long distances during harsh weather conditions"*. Fadi claims that *"weather conditions like extreme cold or heat sometimes restrict activities"*. He continues that in winter, many students miss school since their parents do not allow them to go *"due to heavy rain, floods and muddy roads"*, something confirmed by Salam too: *"In winter there is high absence. They suffer from rain and mud, and the agricultural roads with holes, they fall down on their way, so their shoes get dirty and even ruined"*. Many students, especially the ones who live far from the school, reach the school dirty and need to change their clothes because of the weather conditions, although their mothers send them neat and tidy, as Saeed comments, but *"they rarely arrive to school like that"*, he continues. Salam also comments that *"the distant ones [students] get all muddy and ruin their clothes"*. On the other hand, in the summer extreme heat poses a challenge, as stated by Salam: *"In summer, they complain about the hot weather"* and the means available for cooling and ventilation, combined with the large number of students are not enough to improve the conditions, as it is claimed by both Fadi: *"The classrooms have fans, but they are inadequate due to low ceilings and a large number of students, leading to poor ventilation"* and Salam: *"We open the windows or the door, but only those near the fan feel the coolness"*.

Safety hazards also challenge refugee children's education. In addition to the dangers of mud, heavy rain, floods and heat described above, the children also have to face various other hazards on their way to school. *"They complain about the long way or the stray dogs following them on the road"* Salam notes. In addition, for the children living far away from the school there is an issue of street safety, since, as Fadi notes, *"crossing roads is a major concern, especially in bad weather"*. The said students complain that *"they're afraid of crossing the road"*, with teachers asking them if they *"can cross the road"* when they want to leave school. The problem, naturally, worsens during the *"time of rain or mud"*.

Last but not least, the poor financial and health condition of the families usually require children to stay at home and not attend school. Saeed presents the issue of child labour, claiming that *"some children temporarily drop out seasonally to work with their families in nearby vegetable or olive fields"*, confirmed by Salam who also states the parents' unwillingness to send their children at school during the olive picking season: *"we face the problem of children not coming during those months because they go in farms to work with their families. We talked to parents that this is very bad for children, but we couldn't solve this issue"*. Poverty and its related living conditions also prevent children from being prepared for school. Fadi underlines that often children *"mention challenges like not having light to do homework"* and Salam informs us that students *"sometimes in winter they come wearing flip flops or sandals"* and when asked about it they reply that their parents cannot afford to buy them shoes or clothes: *"when we ask them, they say my parents can't buy me another pair of shoes. And the same with clothes"*. She also revealed the story of a girl with a lice problem, who, when asked about it replied that *"her father goes to beg for money and her mom works in a farm and she and her siblings stay alone most of the time, so she has no one to help her"*, thus highlighting the difficulties faced by various children in refugee situations. Farah also provided us with a recollection of a girl who, having skipped one day at school, appeared the next without her homework. When asked about it, she replied:

Miss, last night the tent ceiling was torn and the rain ruined everything in our tent, everything. Our mattresses too were soaked we didn't sleep and my mom was crying all the time. We had to move to another tent.

Also, the health issues of children or their parents sometimes are the reason why children are absent from school. This is highlighted by a powerful story Salam shared with us:

I had students who were sisters, and they took turns coming to school. When I asked why they didn't come together, they refused to tell me they usually said I don't know or just remained silent. Later, I learned their mother was ill and they were the eldest daughters who had to take care of their mom and other siblings. It affected their level at school and in the end only one of them continued to come to school. We talked a lot with parents, and they said they will send the other one but that didn't happen.

All the above difficulties refugee children living in camps in Syria face, pose significant obstacles towards their normal development, school life and education, making it difficult for them to attend school regularly and undistracted. This is something that bothers the children themselves and they often discuss it, often showing unwillingness to participate in school education. Salam brings into the discussion the example of children leaving far away in nomadic region who "*repeatedly say it's so cold and question why they have to come to school*", adding that "*In general, they get annoyed during school time. It's not a comfortable situation*" preventing the children from understanding and enjoying the merits and benefits of school life and education.

5.3 Children's social interactions and strategies

5.3.1 Play, socialization – social interaction and challenges

Another poignant issue that emerged from the interviews was the refugee children's social interaction and the challenges they face as far as socialization is concerned. Through the data collected it became apparent that children socialize according to gender, age, familial ties, proximity and culture similarity.

In Sweden, Clara notes that children usually "*tend to form groups based on cultural and language similarities. Families from the same country often socialize together*". However, as she and Sami state, children in many cases create friendships and play together even when they do not share the

same language, since *"younger children play together more easily without the need for a common language"* (Clara) and *"they like making friends without needing a common language"* (Sami), although, as Sami admits *"it plays a huge role if they speak the same language"*. Children also tend to form groups based on their age and gender too, especially in the case of girls. As Sami reports, *"Most girls aged 7-9 prefer to be with other girls, while boys don't mind as much"*, whereas Sara and Lina inform us that children play with the ones that are close in age: *"It's not that the little children play with the big ones, except within the family"*. Also, they continue, families with a lot of children usually see them playing and socializing together, in the realms of their own family: *"There is a family with three or four children, so they often stick together most of the time"*. Similar is the case in Syria. In line with Clara, Saeed states that *"many children tend to form groups based on familial ties, like relatives or people from the same region"*. They also create strong bonds *"with relatives or neighbors, also classmates"* even during school breaks. Proximity is another factor that has an effect on the creation of friendships. As Fadi notes, *"they usually gather based on residence proximity. Relationships are formed with nearby peers"* since he continues, *"distant residences limit play interactions because they can't go far from their tents"* and Saeed echoes this fact when he claims that *"children from nearby tents know each other well"*. Farah also highlights the fact that children *"form groups based on gender and proximity"*. Salam agrees with the gender factor, noting that girls and boys seem to *"form separate friend groups"*. She adds that *"the girls are usually together, and boys stay together, but girls usually make friends with those in the same class or with relatives, especially gender"*, something underlined by Farah too: *"I have parties in my class, and girls form groups based on their environment"*.

The subject of play was also prominent within the data collected. All interviewees referred to the daily play children do in both Sweden and Syria. As Sami says, *"the children would play in the corridors or, unfortunately, many sat on chairs played on mobile phones"*. They also gather *"near the reception area, in the restaurant."* Sami claims that they *"invent games to play together"* and that they *"love groups"*. Clara also refers to football as a sport they play *"they might play football together"*. But mostly, they play in the playroom when it is open. He describes a variety of activities they do there, which they can choose on their own:

They have 100% freedom to choose whatever they want. We have three rooms and a closet containing all the activity materials. They can take anything they want, like

a ball, jumping rope, or other items, with our help if needed. It should be safe. Some older children prefer the room with crafts, while the other side, with sofas, is popular for playing cards or sit and have Swedish fika. The younger ones enjoy the room with many simple games and toys.

Sara and Lina also underline the fact that the children mostly play within the playroom, describing a variety of activities they do there: *"they set the table"*, every time they want to play UNO. They also inform us that children usually initiate the play themselves and *"start playing on their own"*, inviting people to play with them later on, even adults: *"first, they play a bit by themselves, then they go and tap someone on the shoulder and want them to come, and we as adults are also gladly invited and participate in this"*. As they state, *"they play as children play"* and *"they take into consideration and understand. They can help each other a little bit"*.

In Syria, the children play both in school and along the campsite, between the tents, something mentioned by all participants in the Syrian part. As Saeed notes, the children *"gather outside any tent, they talk and run play games"* and *"you see them everywhere between tents, roads, small squares between tents"*. The same is confirmed by Fadi: *"children here gather in front of school or between tents and on the roads"*, *"they always gather in any small empty space between tents if possible"*, Salam: *"Most of them play between the tents because the roads are narrow and difficult for cars to pass"*, as well as Farah: *"Pretty much everywhere, in the roads between tents"*, *"Sometimes they gather in front of school"*. There are also some places around the camp that they usually like to play, such as an olive tree field nearby stated by both Salam: *"in the olive tree farm"* and Farah: *"play in olive trees field behind the tents"*. Saeed also informs us about a forest area where the children prefer to go and play since the *"trees create a favorable environment, shade in heat"*, Farah talks about the fact that they *"run to the near mountain slide"* and Salam refers to *"the nearby hills"* too. She also notes that the children tend to *"prefer to go to theme parks"* and usually ask to, but *"it's far and not affordable for everyone"*. Farah also presents an abandoned school where *"some boys jump over its walls to get inside and play there"*. They also play on their way to school, where they sometimes go, as Saeed says, *"in pairs like brothers or sisters" or "in groups"*, confirmed by Salam: *"They gather and come to school together as a group of about 6 students"*. Going to school in groups not only presents a chance to play along the way, but also serves as protection from the stray dogs, Salam says: *"they go in groups because they don't dare to go alone"*

there". Another way of spending time together and playing is visiting each other. Salam reported that *"they visit each other"* and that *"they might go to other friends and study together"* or, as Farah claims, *"they play with peers at their grandparents' tents"*. Last but not least, *"they love the activity room"*, Saeed notes.

Since in Syria children have some open spaces -even restricted with no facilities- children usually have more opportunities for free play. Saeed describes a variety of activities like football, running and sliding in the mud: *"If they see a stone or plastic piece as a pretend ball, they play along the road"*, *"Once we saw boys holding hands in pairs, run and slide on the mud, they also sometimes play football with plastic or fabric balls"*. Fadi says that they play *"with playdough"*, *"with small toys, small balls"* as well as *"games that don't require toys like running or hide and seek"*. Salam also refers to football: *"They play football on these roads, especially in the summer"*, running and hide and seek: *"They run after each other, they play hide and seek"*. Farah confirms football as well as hide and seek and adds rope games: *"They usually play games like hide and seek and rope games. Boys play football"*. Boys also *"gather to go to the playground outside the camp to watch games from outside"* as Fadi notes. Girls on the other hand, according to Farah *"usually play inside the residential units near their homes"* or *"around the tents"*, confirmed by Fadi too: *"For girls they stay close to their tents playing teacher and students or hide and seek or make circles and sing"*.

However, the absence of schooling and open spaces in Sweden as well as the limited organized activities, facilities and daily routines in both environments as explained earlier, along with other difficulties concerning pose as obstacles these children have to face in order to socialize and create relationships.

First of all, cultural and language barriers restrict children's opportunities for social interaction. In Sweden, the fact that they do not have the same cultural and linguistic background impair their socialization. As Clara puts it, *"Language barriers significantly affect their interactions. Children from different cultures don't usually socialize unless there's an organized activity that includes translation"*. This fact creates their need for translation in order to communicate and their inability to participate in group activities naturally: *"they need help to communicate with translation or create an organized activities for the whole group, otherwise they wouldn't do that naturally. It's not easy to communicate"*. She underlines that *"the main challenges are the lack of space and the*

language barriers". Sami also underscores the importance of the same language in their social interactions: *"it plays a huge role if speak the same language"*, also underlining that *"language is a barrier in communicating with other children and making friends"*. Sara and Lina too claim that *"the communication in the language isn't much"*. In the Syrian part, although most of the children speak Arabic, *"sometimes accents or using words differently could play a role in their interactions"*, Fadi states, giving the example of *"pronouncing a word differently based on their background"*. Salam, too, refers to language barriers and explains that sometimes children *"mock each other"* because they have *"many accents, from nomads to urban"*. As she notes *"Despite our instructions to respect others, cultural differences remain obvious"*. The issue of different cultural backgrounds bothers Fadi too, who comments that there are *"different cultures within the same social fabric"*. Saeed also claims that *"differences in refugees backgrounds like city and village lifestyles create a lack of harmony sometimes. Children stick to their camp's traditions and even accents, rarely leaving to further areas within the camp."*

Another challenge refugee children have to face in their social interaction is, interestingly, other residents of the shelters. Given the absence of child-friendly places and the confinement within small areas, either in refugee accommodations in Sweden or in camps in Syria, the children playing in corridors or in the areas between the tents, creates tension among other refugees. Sami refers to instances when *"the children sometimes annoyed other residents because they were playing in the corridors or on their phones"*. This usually results in the intervention of the migration department *"advising the parents that they couldn't let the children out in the hotel or to the open rooms without supervision"*. The same happens in Syria too, along the residents of the nearby tents. Farah recollects cases when the children's noisy play has led to people *"shouting at them and tell them to play in another place"*. She also adds the case of the owner of the olive tree field who *"tells them not to play there during trees blossoming season because the flowers might fall"*.

Last but not least, another limitation that challenges children's ability to socialize are gender differences, adding another obstacle to girls. Although generally boys appear to roam freely, girls have other restrictions too. Farah highlights that *"some parents are cautious about girls playing with boys"* since *"awareness is needed."* This restricts girls to playing *"very close to their tents with their neighbors' children"* and not *"going as far as boys"*.

5.3.2 Adaptive strategies

Although refugee children in the various shelters examined face a variety of challenges, they seem to navigate and adapt to their challenging living conditions, demonstrating remarkable adaptability as well as showcasing agency by influencing both their environment and the activities they participate in.

Children tend to adapt to the lack of child-friendly places by utilizing every little space they can find available. In Sweden, children play in corridors and small halls when the playroom is closed, using whatever areas are available, as stated by both Clara: *"children adapt by playing in the corridors or the small hall"* and Sami: *"They often gathered next to the relaxing room on the second floor. There is a corridor with a large glass window overlooking the garden."* Even when a bench in this area was removed by the migration officials, children still adapted and sat *"on the carpets"*, as Sami notes. It is interesting to see that, as Clara claims, *"these places are not specifically indicated by the staff"*; they are the only available places that children can find, and so they did. Accordingly, in Syria, where no child-friendly spaces are available either, children again tend to use any free area within or close to the camp, , mostly narrow streets and spaces between the tents, as it was claimed by all interviewees: Sami: *"so children adapt with what they find of spaces which is as I told you before within roads"*, *"they always gather in any small empty space between tents if possible"*, Salam: *"Most of them play between the tents because the roads are narrow and difficult for cars to pass"* and Farah: *"Children run around the tents, they look for the tiniest open spot to play and gather in."*

In finding alternative places to play and socialize refugee children often alter the nature of spaces such as in the case of Syria, where they utilize an olive tree field or hills nearby to play as Salam claims: *"in the olive tree farm, on the nearby hills"*, or the old abandoned school, noted by Farah: *"There's an abandoned school some boys jump over its walls to get inside and play there"*. Their choice of space also is affected by the weather conditions. In the summer they tend to find shaded areas: Salam: *"In the hot summer, they look for shaded spaces, like under trees in nature nearby"*, whereas in the winter, Salam adds, *"they look for the least muddy areas"*. Sometimes they even have to move to a different place or change their game in order not to annoy the people in the neighboring tents, as Farah notes: *"when they are playing with the ball and someone gets upset and tell them to stop, they play with something else or go to another spot to avoid troubles"*, or

when the owner of the olive farm asks the children to stop playing and leave the field during the blossom season to protect the flowers, as noted by Salam: "*During Olive blossoming season, the owner told them any movement may cause them to fall, and that means no olives or olive oil. So, they avoid being there*". However, this adaptability on changing spots is not apparent in the refugee shelters in Sweden, since when residents are annoyed, the migration department intervenes and the children return to their rooms, Sami states: "*The migration department would intervene if they saw the children in the corridors*".

There also seem to be adaptations to the use of specific items. Children in Syria creatively play with the mud and rainwater as Farah notes: "*they play with the mud sometimes, jump in water ponds*". Saeed recollects the instance when they say two boys "*holding hands in pairs, run and slide on the mud*" and he also informs us that "*also sometimes play football with plastic or fabric balls*". He notes: "*If they see a stone or plastic piece as a pretend ball, they play along the road*". Similarly, they play with "*old, rusty carriage*" they have found on an olive tree farm, "*pulling and pushing it around*" as Farah remembers.

In Sweden, since the children are confined within buildings and have very limited if not a choice, they still adapt altering the use as well as the schedule of the activity room available. First of all, as Clara notes, children often wait outside the playroom for it to open and express the wish for more operating hours: "*They often wait for us in front of it and ask us to open it more often*". When the room is open, they specifically ask for alterations in the schedule so they can have more time to play freely. Even some attempts to organize Swedish lessons failed, since Clara claims, "*the children just wanted to play in this very short time when the room is open*". She adds that "*they showed frustration with planned activities*" for the same reason and ask for more time since, as Sami claims, the staff spending time with them "*made them feel encouraged and safe*". Inside the room, they take more initiatives, as all interviewees highlight.

They also make various alterations to the activity room. Clara informs us that they "*create games*" and even "*adjust the space to be able to play movement games*". She adds that they also change the layout of the activity room "*to create space for a game, like gathering chairs*". The same is highlighted by Sami too. He reports that children change the order of the furniture: "*they often rearrange chairs and tables in the corners. They use the toys to build zones for them*" to better suit their needs for play and young children express their creativity by "*creating spaces in the evening*".

using IKEA equipment to make tunnels or trains". Sami states they are completely free to decide on how and what they wish to spend their time inside the playroom: "They have 100% freedom to choose whatever they want" and that "they can take anything they want". Children choose different activities, usually according to their age, as he notes: "Some older children prefer the room with crafts. The younger ones enjoy the room with many simple games and toys". It is interesting to note that children often even adapt the rules of specific games so they can accommodate more children, and nobody gets disappointed, as Sami comments: "they changed the rules in order to help each other so no one loses and stays out of the game". Sara and Lina also refer to the fact that children are willing to help when they "arrange or organize something". Children also express their preferences and provide feedback on activities, as Sami claims: "we listen to the children and take note of what they prefer to do. Also usually, after each activity, we collect feedback".

Last but not least, children also adapt to the language challenges, either by actively "*asking us directly for help with language*" as Sami says or by adapting their activities: "*they might play football together using gestures if they don't share a language*", Clara comments. Sami also highlights the result of the adaptation on language differences on children's relationship with each other: "*you could see children in these corridors who couldn't speak the same language become best friends and finding ways to communicate and inventing games to play together*".

Farah offers a very insightful summary of the children's adaptive strategies when she comments that "*these children have very little, but they deal with what they have*", adding: "*they don't like living here, but they've gotten used to it. For some of them It's the only life they know*", highlighting the degree of adaptation refugee children showcase.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Concluding discussion

The analysis of the data demonstrates how refugee camps and shelter environments affect, form and constrain children's social life, play interactions, and in general, their well-being. The five central themes identified showcase how the harsh living conditions, the lack of child-friendly spaces, the educational and the social challenges refugee children face, and how children are forced to develop and implement specific adaptive strategies in order to cope with the difficult circumstances. Through these strategies they become agentic in their own lives, shaping both the environment and their social interactions and hopefully their opportunities for a better future.

Firstly, the challenging living conditions within the refuge shelters examined, either in urban settings in the case of Sweden or in open spaces as in the case of Syria, profoundly affect the children's physical and psychological well-being as well as their academic and professional future. Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff underline the impact of the place in displacement on children's development and well-being since the nature of these places contributes to children's understanding of the world (1983: 60). The overcrowded, hazardous and unhygienic conditions in Syrian camps as well as the antisocial and confined within buildings environment in Sweden not only hamper the children's day-to-day activities but impact their social interactions, emotional and physical health as well.

Secondly, the children's ability to engage in play, socialize, and develop their personalities in a safe and creating environment is severely restricted due to the total absence or severe limitation of child-friendly spaces within the shelters. The absence of said places or the very limited access to them forces children to remain for most of their day in confined, inadequate areas, thus jeopardizing their safety and their social development too.

Additionally, the educational challenges these children face are severe, affecting both their knowledge as well as their social integration both now and in the future. The lack of formal schooling and organized activities in Sweden as well as the harsh conditions of the in-camp life in Syria from the poor infrastructure of schools to the limited educational resources deprive children

of essential, adequate and regular learning opportunities. This is enhanced by the weather, the tents environment and even the families' economic situations. Especially in Sweden where no schooling is offered, instability of families to settle in one place and the relocations cause a lack of structured routines and of school life. In addition, in the case of Sweden, the confinement in the rooms, the absence of formal schooling as well as the overall uninviting environment of refugee shelters minimize the opportunities for social interaction and play among the children. This creates a sense of disconnection and alienation as well as poses a barrier to the formation of friendships and involvement in social activities, something crucial for the children's overall development and well-being. This point was also marked in Karlsson's research, stating that asylum centers in Sweden isolate children from integrating in public life and create zones of indistinctions (2021: 17). Vitus also underlines that these centers have a serious effect on children's social development (Vitus, 2010: 39).

However, as it becomes obvious from the analysis, the children seem to develop creative adaptive strategies in order to be able to overcome the obstacles their situations pose, a clear expression of their agency. They are not just passive recipients of the harsh circumstances. On the contrary, they become active agents in their lives, altering and re-shaping their environment to better cover their need for social interaction, play, educational opportunities, and overall rounded development. There is a variety of strategies children use in order to adapt to their situation. They respond to the limited space and resources by transforming the common areas, corridors, narrow paths, small empty patches of land or even fields into places to play or socialize and alter the layout of the activity rooms according to their desires. In addition, they ask for help with different languages and demand alterations to the schedules so that they cover their need for more and free play. These are instances of children taking their lives in their own hands and actively shaping their environment and their lives.

Even under these severe circumstances which have in many cases become the permanent and only way of life these children have experienced, they reclaim their childhood and show extreme resilience, adopting various coping mechanisms to adapt to these circumstances, thus displaying their resourcefulness and ability to navigate, survive and develop within challenging environments. As highlighted by Ní Laoire et al, these adaptive strategies are reflections of how children navigate

and form identities and challenge the difficult conditions, contradicting the traditional notions of childhood. (Ni Laoire et al, 2010: 158).

6.2 Recommendations

However, the children's adaptive strategies should not be considered a substitute for the necessary official changes, essential for their healthy development. Although the children's agency through adaptive strategies helps them overcome many of the obstacles posed by their refugee situation, there is an urgent need for measures taken for improving the living conditions of refugee children worldwide, ensuring that they have adequate child-friendly spaces, uninterrupted access to formal education and unhindered opportunities for social interaction, even within refugee camps and shelters. These measures will not only play a crucial part in their well-being but will also enhance their future prospects and social integration.

Firstly, living conditions should be improved. Children should be given access to basic services such as healthcare and sanitation. As Karlsson states in her study, "asylum policies stand in contrast with children's rights" and how these poor conditions within these housings affect children (Karlsson 2021: 19). Changes to the shelters' infrastructures should also be implemented to provide children with safe, hygienic and larger living spaces that reduce overcrowding, and that ensure the children's well-being. Also, in the case of camps, schools' infrastructures should be improved, providing students with safer and weather-resistant educational facilities. In addition, within the shelters safe play areas should be created, where secure and supervised play can take place. Children will then be able to socialize and engage in free play with their peers. Not only play areas but also recreational facilities should be constructed that will support various types of sports, art classes and cultural activities. Along with their social interactions, children's cultivation and emotional development will be promoted as well.

Furthermore, access to formal education should be provided under all circumstances. Children should be offered consistent schooling, regardless of the type and location of the camp and the time period they are going to spend within the specific shelter. The curricula offered should be adjusted to the educational needs of these children in order to facilitate future integration and at the same time respect their specific cultures and traditions. Additionally, special programs should

be implemented that focus on the social interaction and integration of refugee children within the societies they are relocated to. These should include activities that involve both refugee children and local communities in order to reduce marginalization and promote social inclusion.

Last but not least, there is an urgent need for stable and inclusive educational policies and collaboration between NGOs and local governments to ensure children's access to education as well as more flexible enrollment procedures. This collaboration should go beyond educational aspects and consider offering comprehensive social policies that support children's health and protection. Combining educational and social policies will contribute to creating support systems for refugee children that provide them with opportunities to thrive despite the challenges.

As far as research is concerned, although our research attempts to cover the aspect of refugee children's social interactions, adapting strategies and relation to the harsh environment, more insight should be given on how the confining refugee camps/ shelters environment affects various other aspects of the refugee children's lives.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

General Questions

1. What strategies do children in refugee camps employ in their social interactions, in relation to the specificities of the physical environments? This question aims to discover how children act in relation to their physical surroundings, as well as how they adapt in order to form their social interactions.
2. How are the available facilities (e.g., recreational, educational) within the camps used by children in their group activities and social gatherings?

Follow-up questions

1. Can you describe the overall environment of the refugee camp as well as the facilities available for children?
2. Can you describe the daily routine of the kids in the camp?
3. Can you give an account of their daily schedule as far as planned activities are concerned?
4. Is there any type of in-camp schooling?
5. Where and how do the kids spend their free time?
6. Can you describe the specific spots in the camp that the kids tend to spend time at? Are they places that the kids have chosen or are they specifically indicated by the staff?
7. If indicated, are there indicated areas the kids tend to prefer? What are their characteristics? If chosen, what are their characteristics too and what makes them popular?
8. How do the kids tend to form their group of friends? According to age/ gender/spatial closeness in the camp or any other factors?
9. How do children's different backgrounds (such as language or culture) affect their social interactions within the camp?
10. Have any changes been made to the camp's layout or facilities based on the children's activities and use?

11. How do the children adjust their play or other social activities to fit within the available space in the camp?
12. Do children alter the use of specific spaces in order to better fit their need for play or socialization and if so, what type of alterations do they tend to make?
13. Except organized activities, is there any other activity (independent or self-organized) that brings kids together more often?
14. What challenges do children face when trying to play or socialize in this environment and how do they overcome them?

Appendix 2: Informed Consent



Consent to participation in research

The aim of this research is to understand the influence of the refugee camp environments on the social interactions of 6–12 year-old refugee children in Syria and Sweden.

We are conducting semi-structured interviews, the expected time of which is going to be 45-60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted online depending on your availability or preference.

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of

Names, professional positions in the camps, phone numbers, and email addresses. Also, we are going to record the interviews so they can be transcribed and analyzed later.

for the following purposes:

By collecting and analyzing data, we (the researchers) hope to investigate how camp design and physical settings influence children's abilities to engage in social activities, form friendships, participate in community life as well as to explore the strategies they employ within such environments to cover their social needs, and present evidence-based recommendations to foster partnerships among child-focused organizations, NGOs, educators, and policymakers. The goal is to enhance the social well-being and improve the lives of displaced children by contributing to the creation of supportive environments that meet the unique needs of vulnerable children.

Information:

Your personal data will be stored only on storage services approved by Linköping university, and no other persons than Areti Frementiti & Ola Sobh in addition to the supervisor, Karin Zaetterqvist Nelson, will access the data. The personal data will be kept until the thesis has received a grade, but never longer than until December 31 four years after the data was collected.

Personal data controller is Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, corporate identification number 202100-3096.

Contact: **Areti Frementiti** Email address: arefr862@student.liu.se

Ola Sobh Email address: olaso615@student.liu.se

Legal basis for the data processing: Consent.

You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. We will in that case stop using your personal data that we have collected based on your consent.

You may request to have your personal data erased, and if you do so, we will erase information about you wherever possible. You have the right to obtain information about your personal data that are processed by Linköping University. You may request this in writing by contacting the registrar's office at Linköping University, either by email or letter. You also have the right to request that the use of certain of your personal data be limited.

If you want to know how your personal data is used, or you believe that we have used your personal data in a way that violates the agreement or current legislation, please contact Linköping University's data protection officer at dataskyddsbud@liu.se. If you have complaints regarding the way in which Linköping University processes your personal data, you are always entitled to

contact the relevant inspection authority, which in this case is the Swedish Data Protection Authority.

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data according to the information above.

Place	Signature
Date	Name