Highlighting the needs of educational support services working with young refugees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences of service providers and teachers in Austria

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1. Introduction and study background

As has been broadly highlighted, COVID-19 puts a spotlight on educational inequalities. Involving complex dynamics, it is safe to say that educational contexts have changed for almost all children and young people worldwide. For some, the changes have been short-lived, having little impact on their educational biographies, for others the pandemic has resulted in massive and long-standing – sometimes also health-related – disruptions (e.g. Reimers 2022). These have included shifts to remote education settings, phases of school closures to enable and promote physical distance, and an increased use of digital tools. As the impact varies between different groups, and is affected by many factors, we cannot simply conclude that resilience is automatically and inevitably interlocked with e.g. economic aspects or stable family backgrounds etc., as these may also be affected by the dynamics and intersectoral influences of the pandemic. The pandemic challenges our understanding of vulnerability by underlining some of the obvious vulnerabilities, hinting at unexplored ones, but also by pushing some already affected groups even more into the

background (Obermayr et al., 2021). This leads to further and more individualized demands, which educational and other support staff have to meet. Another aspect that is often referenced is that of increasing digitalisation on the one hand and a growing digital divide on the other. Limited access to technological devices shapes educational shortcomings but can also pose opportunities for furthering digital literacies (e.g. Liu 2021). Educational and other support staff have also faced the challenges resulting from familial support being compromised or even removed by the pandemic:

In addition to the learning loss and disengagement with learning caused by the interruption of in-person instruction and by the variable efficacy of alternative forms of education, other direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic diminished the ability of families to support children and young people in their education. For students, as well as for teachers and school staff, these included the economic shocks experienced by families, in some cases leading to food insecurity, and in many more

causing stress and anxiety and impacting mental health. (Reimers 2022, 2)

This paper focuses on children and young people affected by forced migration and how their landscape of demands and provision was affected by the pandemic. Only a few studies have focused on the specific needs of these groups and their scope often remains confined to specific geographical areas (e.g. Santiago et al., 2021 for the US; Mukumbang et al., 2020 for South Africa) and findings have either targeted medical health or remained rather general. Insights into education in a German-speaking context are scarce, even more so for Austria. This study mainly focuses on groups affected by war and crises in e.g. Syria leading to movements of many people to – among other places – Europe in 2015 and 2016. Next to Germany and Sweden, Austria was one of the countries where many people filed asylum, leading to almost 90,000 applications in 2015 (Kohlenberger and Buber-Ennser 2017).

We – the team of authors – were approached by collaboration partners from NGOs and administrative representatives focusing on challenges for the above-mentioned groups, and were asked to support assessment and communication needs for both support staff (social workers, legal and health advisors, NGO workers etc.) supporting everyday questions and needs of refugees in the context of legal, educational and housing-related questions and educational staff. Thus, the findings presented are derived from

the experiences of the two groups, which were collected by means of semi-structured questionnaires. It measured the needs of teachers and support staff, as well as services offered to children and young people affected by experiences of forced migration, including asylum seekers, children and young people under subsidiary protection, and children and young people who have been granted asylum. The study formally spans the ages 0–25 years, but due to its institutional and educational focus, mainly includes people between age 7 and early 20s. The study focus includes formal and non-formal educational settings offering (vocational) training to young people above the age of compulsory education – who are thus not entitled to formal education (Atanasoska and Proyer, 2018) – and additional support services offering educational counselling as well as financial advice and other forms of support in relation to education, health, housing, and legal services. The study was conducted in Austria during the early onset of the pandemic: support staff answered the questionnaire less than 1 year into the pandemic, and the teachers a bit more than 1 year into it. This relatively short period had nevertheless contained a variety of changes, including one hard lockdown with all schools being closed, phases of part-closures of certain school types or levels, systems of pupil rotations, as well as phases of almost no restrictions, due to low levels of contagion. This allowed us to document immediate shifts in types of demand among children, young people, teachers, and service providers.

2. Research interest and intention

The research presented focuses on identifying developments related to educational needs and support structures, as well as possible deficits deriving from impacted services for refugee students and young people during crises. Regarding pandemic-related challenges, our study delivers data

concerning the sufficiency of offers of necessary support, how these may have changed (or needed to change) due to the pandemic, and their accessibility. We reached out to two groups – service providers and teachers of refugee students and young people – that are directly involved with refugee

students and young people and their specific needs in relation to the pandemic crisis. Addressing the two target professions/institutions, our research questions, presented in two separate online surveys, were as follows:

Research questions regarding how service providers' spheres of activity have been influenced by the crisis (survey I).

1. What type of support do the service providers offer?

2. Which specific target groups among refugee students and young people do the service providers address?

3. What additional support demands have surfaced among refugee students and young people in the context of the pandemic?

4. What types of support do service providers themselves need in order to further develop the support they offer throughout and despite the crisis?

5. Has supervision ratio and/or disposability of resources changed due to the pandemic?

Research questions regarding how teachers' spheres of activity have been influenced by the crisis (survey II)

6. Do teachers make referrals to support offered by service providers?

7. What challenges have the pandemic presented among teachers of refugee students and young people?

8. What do teachers need in order to cope with challenges presented by the pandemic?

The empirically validated answers should address the current challenges by suggesting evidence-based changes or strategic adjustments that schools and service providers can implement in their work with the groups under study. Our cooperation partners – the Vienna City School Board and UNHCR Austria – have already received a first analysis of our study in the form of two unpublished research reports and executive summaries (Reitinger, Holzmayer and Proyer, 2021a, 2021b).

3. Study Design

In line with the reach of our project network, our surveys took place in the greater Vienna area, Austria. The data collection process was kindly supported by the Vienna City School Board and UNHCR, who used their contacts with service providers and teachers. The following sections describe the samples recruited in the two surveys and the methodological approach.

3.1 Description of samples

The survey of the target groups took place over two consecutive survey periods. The sample of service providers was recruited from December 2020 to January 2021. The other sample, comprising teachers of refugee students and young people, was interviewed in May and June 2021. The analyses of both samples are based on fully anonymised data sets.

Sample of survey I: service providers.

The online survey addressing service providers was accessed 117 times during the survey period. 71 records had to be excluded due to early dropouts and missed assessments. The decision to exclude records was made on the basis of duration and progression parameters calculated by the online survey service used (cf. chapter 3.2). After this process of data cleansing, N = 46 usable data sets remained for further analysis.

Sample of survey II: teachers of refugee students and young people.

After excluding unusable records (also based on duration and progress parameters) N = 212 complete responses from teachers of refugee students and young people could be used for further analysis. This online survey was visited 218 times in total.

Most participating teachers are primary school teachers (N_{primary} = 111; educating students typically aged 6 to 10 years), followed by secondary school teachers ($N_{\text{secondary}}$ = 85; educating students typically aged 10 to 14 years). Two further persons report working in both types of schools. Another seven people work in specific centers for inclusive and special needs education ("Zentren für Inklusiv- und Sonderpädagogik"; Bildungsdirektion Wien, 2021).

3.2 Study approach and analytical methods

Both surveys were conducted using a similar methodological approach. In both survey periods, the data material was collected via the online survey service "Unipark" (Questback, 2021). Since at the time no standardised questionnaires were available for the very specific research questions, we had to create suitable items and question batteries for both surveys. The resulting non-standardised online questionnaires – one aimed at service providers, the other at teachers – were reviewed and revised in several revision processes by all participating project cooperation partners before being used. The questionnaires mainly consist of closed items that represent categorical, ordinal, or interval scaled variables. Some items allow for open answers.[29]

The data were largely analysed descriptively. Group comparisons were tested with inferential statistical procedures (*t*-tests; Field, 2018, pp. 445–452) using the software 'IBM SPSS Statistics' (Pallant, 2020). Open-ended responses were inductively categorised, counted, and ranked (quantifying content analysis; Früh, 1998) with the aim of assessing their relevance.

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29 Example of a question from the questionnaire addressed to service providers: "Hat sich durch die COVID-19-Pandemie in Ihrer Beratungs- bzw. Anlaufstelle das Betreuungsverhältnis bzw. die Ressourcenlage verändert?" [Has the COVID-19-pandemic changed the support ratio or resource situation in your institution?] („sehr verbessert" [significantly improved] / "eher verbessert" [somewhat improved] / "nicht verändert" [no change] / „eher verschlechtert" [somewhat worse] / "sehr verschlechtert" [significantly worse]). „Falls ja, wie bzw. warum?" [If so, how and why?] (open response). Example of question posed in the questionnaire addressed to teachers: "Welche Unterstützung brauchen Sie als Lehrperson, um Ihre Tätigkeit mit Blick auf die COVID-19-bedingten Herausforderungen zielführend weiterentwickeln zu können?" [Considering the challenges caused by the pandemic, what types of support do you need to further develop your educational work?] (open response). We offer open access to our questionnaires an appreciate distributing it on demand. In case of interest, please do not hesitate to contact us (johannes.reitinger@univie.ac.at).

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4. Findings

Our research findings are presented in the following sections, sorted around the defined research questions (1) to (8).

(1) What types of support do the service providers offer?

The 46 service providers were invited to mark predefined categories of support services they offer to refugee students and young people

(closed item format). The result for the surveyed categories (educational counselling, occupational counselling, psychological counselling, assessment of competences, learning support, support during visits from authorities, counselling concerning educational media and technologies, and financial support) are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Categories of support offered by service providers.

Support category*	Number of service providers offering this support category**	Rank according to frequency of mention
1) educational counselling	24 (52.2 %)	2
2) occupational counselling	19 (41.3 %)	3
3) psychological counselling	6 (13.0 %)	7
4) assessment of competences	11 (23.9 %)	5
5) learning support	27 (58.7 %)	1
6) support during visits from authorities	16 (34.8 %)	4
7) counselling concerning educational media and technologies	10 (21.7 %)	6
8) financial support	5 (10.9 %)	8

* Service providers in Austria commonly offer educational counselling ("Bildungsberatung"; e.g. getting to know institutionalized opportunities to upgrade one's education) but also occupational ("Berufsberatung"; e.g. counselling regarding interests, strengths, and opportunities concerning occupational orientation) and psychological counselling ("psychologische Beratung"; e.g. support in the context of difficult personal circumstances). Assessment of competences ("Kompetenzerfassung") means support in the course of the application of standardized measurements to find out one's educational attainment. These terms, as well as learning support ("Lernhilfe"), support during visits from authorities ("Unterstützung bei öffentlichen Gängen"), counselling concerning educational media and technologies ("Beratung im Bereich der Verwendung von Bildungsmedien bzw. -techniken"), and financial support ("finanzielle Unterstützung") were not closer described within the used questionnaire as they are self-explanatory in the context of Austrian support facilities.
** Percent values refer to the overall sample ($N = 46$).

According to the descriptive data in Table 1, service providers mainly deal with learning support and educational guidance, while psychological counselling and financial support seem to play minor roles within the service providers' support portfolio.

(2) Which specific target groups among refugee students and young people do the support offered by service providers address?

37 (80.4 %) of the 46 surveyed service providers offer services to young refugees who have been granted asylum; 36 (78.3 %) service providers address children and young people with subsidiary protection status, and finally 25 (54.3 %) care for asylum seekers. 22 (47.8 %) address persons age eleven and over; 17 (37.0 %) also address younger persons (7 responses missing: 15.2 %). In 35 (76.1 %) of our service providers, the direct contact persons are the refugee pupils and young people themselves. 20 (43.5 %) providers are in contact with parents, legal guardians, or caregivers, while 14 (30.4 %) also maintain contact with the clients' teachers. Only 4 (8.7 %) are in contact with youth coaches, and only 2 (4.3 %) correspond with urgent aid bodies.

(3) What additional support demands have surfaced among refugee students and young people in the context of the pandemic?

According to 29 (63.0 %) service providers, additional pandemic-related support needs have arisen among refugee students and young people. Remarkably, 26 of these service providers report that they were able to meet these new support needs at the time of our survey. The subsample also provided information about concrete forms of such demands via open answers. By means of a summarising content analysis (inductive approach) of these statements, four categories of additional demands could be extracted and ordered according to the frequency (fq) of the assigned statements (quantification): these categories are a) enhanced offers of (distance) trainings

and counselling (*fq* = 15); b) coaching of students and young people in the course of distance learning processes (*fq* = 11), c); adaptation of learning services to the new circumstances (*fq* = 4), and d) technical/digital support and upgrading (*fq* = 3).

(4) What types of support do service providers themselves need in order to further develop the support they offer throughout and despite the crisis?

As before, we identified several categories of support requests from service providers through content analytical data reduction and quantification of open responses. In order of frequency, these are a) financial support (*fq* = 13); b) technical/digital support and upgrading (*fq* = 9); c) expansion of staff and in-house resources (*fq* = 8); d) optimisation of accessibility to clients (*fq* = 7); e) improvement of information flow and co-operation (*fq* = 5), f) trainings and consultations (*fq* = 4), and g) legal protection (*fq* = 1).

(5) Has supervision ratio and/or disposability of resources changed due to the pandemic?

All in all, the care ratio and/or disposability of resources has not changed crucially. The single item used to measure possible change, scaled from 1 ('significantly improved') to 5 ('significantly worse'), gives a mean of *M* = 3.09 (*SD* = .85). As also shown in Figure 1, 19 service providers (54.3 % out of those who rated the concerned item) indicate no change at all.

Figure 1. Changes to supervision ratio and/or disposability of resources
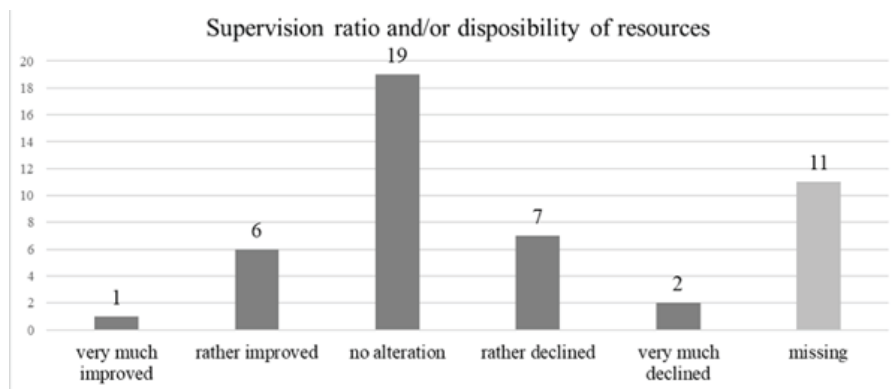
However, a closer view on the apparently normally distributed data reveals differences between specific groups. Looking at the age of the refugee students and young people supported by the surveyed service providers, a significant difference can be observed (*t*[33] = -2.262; *p* < .05). Those service providers who serve individuals aged eleven and older are more concerned with potential changes in the ratio of care and/or availability of resources (*N* = 17; *M* = 3.37; *SD* = .68) than those who also serve younger individuals (*N* = 22; *M* = 2.75; *SD* = .93). In addition, a surpassing calculated effect the size of Cohen's *d* = .77 indicates a clear practical relevance of the difference. Similar results are found with regards to the quantity of support offered by service providers (*t*[33] = -3.432; *p* < .05). Those who give support in three or more service categories[30] assess changes in the care ratio or availability of resources as significantly more problematic (*N* = 21; *M* = 3.53; *SD* = .80) than service providers who do not cover more than two categories (*N* = 20; *M* = 2.67; *SD* = .69). Likewise, the practical relevance (Cohen's *d* = 1.16) of this difference can also be assessed as very high.

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30 As noted along the elaboration of research question (1) the following categories of offers were queried within our study (see also Table 1): educational counselling, occupational counselling, psychological counselling, assessment of competences, learning support, support during visits from authorities, counselling concerning educational media and technologies, and financial support.

(6) Do teachers make referrals to support offered by service providers?

About half of the teachers (111; 52,1 %) make referrals to support services from service providers; but almost as many (94 (44,1 %)) do not (7 responses missing; 2.8 %). They mainly refer to services that provide learning support (38.0 %), psychological counselling (31.5 %), educational counselling (24.9 %), counselling concerning educational media/technologies (17.8 %), support during visits from authorities (8.5 %), or financial support (6.6 %). We also obtained information about how teachers learn from these support services. Using quantifying inductive content analysis, we were able to categorise teachers' information channels into a) in-house conversations ($fq = 35$); b) personal inquiry ($fq = 13$); c) announcements of educational authorities or service providers ($fq = 12$); d) personal networks ($fq = 6$), and e) social media ($fq = 3$).

(7) What challenges has the pandemic given rise to among teachers of refugee students and young people?

Teachers' ratings concerning four single items cited in Table 2 indicate partial overstraining caused by the new circumstances, a slight lack of feasible support, and a clear desire for a variety of support offers.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions of their work with refugee students and young people during the pandemic.

Item*	'highly appropriate' (1)	'somewhat appropriate' (2)	'less than appropriate' (3)	'not appropriate at all' (4)	Mean and Standard deviation
1) 'I feel overwhelmed by these challenges.'	27 12.7 %	**85** **40.9 %**	72 34.0 %	27 12.7 %	**M** = 2.47 **SD** = 0.87
2) 'I have the feeling that I cannot give sufficient support.'	18 8.5 %	69 32.5 %	**98** **46.2 %**	26 12.3 %	**M** = 2.63 **SD** = 0.81
3) 'I have the feeling that refugee students and young people do not get enough support.'	12 5.7 %	39 18.4 %	**98** **46.2 %**	61 28.8 %	**M** = 2.99 **SD** = 0.84
4) 'I wish I could access a wider range of support options.'	**97** **45.8 %**	78 36.8 %	26 12.3 %	9 4.2 %	**M** = 1.75 **SD** = 0.84

* Missing values: Item 1: 1 (0.5 %); Item 2: 1 (0.5 %); Item 3: 2 (0.9 %); Item 4: 2 (0.9 %).

Further, we also looked at specific changes in key areas of work that might be challenging for the teachers concerned. Table 3 shows the results of a total of six such areas of work.

Table 3. Changes in major fields of work.

| Major fields of work*	'intensified' (1)	'no alteration' (2)	'decreased' (3)	Mean and Standard deviation
1) work with parents	80 37.7 %	**98** **46.2 %**	30 14.2 %	**M** = 1.76 **SD** = 0.69
2) administrative tasks	**129** **60.8 %**	77 36.3 %	3 1.4 %	**M** = 1.40 **SD** = 0.52
3) relationship work	**109** **51.4 %**	63 29.7 %	36 17.0 %	**M** = 1.65 **SD** = 0.76
4) preparation of education and instruction	**133** **62.7 %**	73 34.4 %	4 1.9 %	**M** = 1.39 **SD** = 0.53
5) educational/instructional work	**105** **49.5 %**	84 39.6 %	21 9.9 %	**M** = 1.60 **SD** = 0.67
6) Individualisation of learning processes	**126** **59.4 %**	60 28.3 %	24 11.3 %	**M** = 1.51 **SD** = 0.69

* Missing values: Item 1: 4 (1.9 %); Item 2: 3 (1.4 %); Item 3: 4 (1.9 %); Item 4: 2 (0.9 %); Item 5: 2 (0.9 %); Item 6: 2 (0.9 %).

The high frequencies for the attribute 'intensified' (see Table 3) as well as a mean calculated over all six items representing major fields of work (N = 1.55; SD = .39; Cronbach's α = .61) indicate a highly significant shift towards intensification of work (one-group t-test, applying a comparative value = 2; $t(209)$ = -16.558; p < .001).

(8) What do teachers need in order to cope with challenges presented by the pandemic?

Considering the challenges caused by the pandemic, teachers were given an open-ended question with no character limit about what kind of support they need to further develop their pedagogical work. An inductive content analysis revealed several repeatedly mentioned demands that were then categorised.

Figure 1: Frequency of claimed needs from teachers
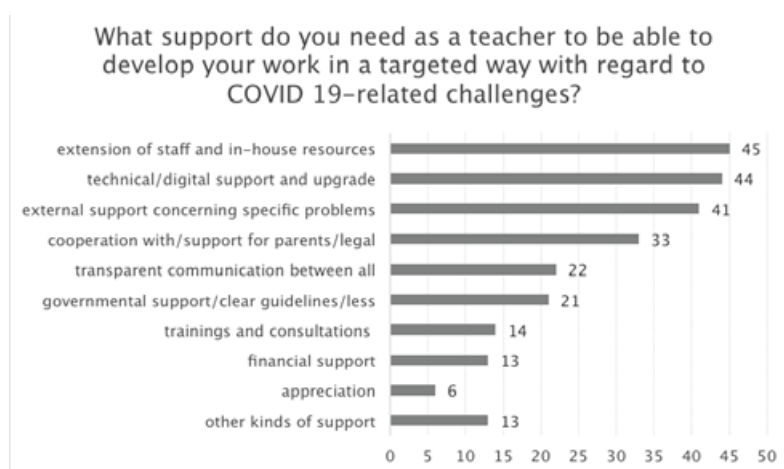
128 of the 212 participating teachers provided open answers, using a blank field in their questionnaire to elaborate on the effects of the COVID-19-pandemic on their daily work. Most entries included several demands, which is why a total of 252 entries could be determined inductively. Teachers demand a similar increase of staff and in-house resources (fq = 45), technical/digital support and upgrade (fq = 44) and external support concerning specific problems (fq = 41). The latter category mainly includes interpreters, social pedagogues, or psychologists from external institutions.

Another main topic for teachers is cooperation with and support for parents and legal guardians (fq = 33). They primarily see the need for financial support, language support, and assistance when dealing with the authorities. The next two categories belong more or less together: requiring transparent communication between all involved (fq = 22) on the one hand and gov-ernmental support/clear guidelines/less bureaucracy (fq = 21) on the other. It looks like teachers are unable to find their way through a wealth of information and are therefore looking for more support and to hand over responsibility. Above all, they criticise the large amount of non-transparent bureaucratic work associated with both refugees and the COVID-19-pandemic, and the combination of the two.

The relatively low demand for training and consultations (fq = 14) could indicate that teachers feel sufficiently prepared experts in their pedagogical work. The entries primarily show the main issues to be bureaucratic hurdles and guidelines, as well as administrative activities, both of which take up too much time. The low demand for financial support (fq = 13) can be explained by the high correlation with other categories, such as more staff and technical/digital support and upgrade, which also require an increase in financial resources. Only entries that explicitly demanded

more money or financial resources were assigned to this category.

And last but not least, it turns out that the desire for appreciation (*fq* = 6) is only sec-ondary. This can be interpreted to mean that the perceived need is so abundant that the desire for recognition does not even arise.

5. Discussion, limitation, and outlook

In conclusion, and recalling the main findings, the following can be carved out as being of specific interest:

a) Firstly, looking at the *service providers,* the need for support that arose from the COVID-19-pandemic are mainly economic in nature, with a focus on the digital sector. These can be seen both at the level of the lack of hardware, but also on the level of the lack of digital competences. This lack of digital skills was evident both among the service provider staff and among the clients. In addition, access to and reachability of children and young people was made particularly difficult by COVID-19. Here, too, the institutions recognise an increase of digital support as a possible solution. Service providers appear to have experienced significant obstacles due to limitations on personal access to clients in times of social distancing.

Service providers are mainly engaged in giving learning support and educational and occupational counselling. They also report the need for further developments of online and distance training and counselling; coaching for students and young people in distance-learning processes, and to further adapt learning services to the new realities and technical/digital support and upgrading. Large differences become apparent when turning to the language offers. For example, 21 institutions state that they provide their services in several – up to 26 – languages. However, 18 facilities provide no multilin-gual services. This shows that there is a great need to catch up on additional language offers.

What is surprising about these results is that the care ratio or the availability of resources did not change decisively during the pandemic for those service providers that focus on the younger target group. The older the clients, the more support needs were identified. Likewise, it became clear that the need for additional support increased in institutions offering their services at many different levels.

The open data well reflect the wide range of support services provided by the service providers, from educational, vocational, and legal counselling to psychological support for those suffering from domestic abuse, as well as physical sports, learning assistance, online computer courses, and intercultural parental work.

b) Secondly, the results of the *survey with the teachers* clearly show that schools face major challenges when working with children and young people with a refugee background in the context of the COVID-19-pandemic. It has proven to be difficult to maintain contact with the students themselves, as well as with their parents, legal guardians, or caregivers. A lack of technical equipment and/or digital skills also leads to problems. The absence of face-to-face contact with the children and the lack of technical equipment present great challenges.

A clear picture emerged from the meaningful inductive categorisation of the open answers to the question of which support options teachers need. In addition to the need for technical and digital support, the desire for additional internal staff and external support options was most strongly reported. Cooperation with parents and guardians, and the need for external (financial) support for parents, which would enable adequate support for the family, was also important to the teachers. The teachers also expressed frustration with increasing administrative requirements and the non-transparent communication between all parties, but especially from the authorities.

More than half of the teachers (53,6%) feel somewhat or significantly overwhelmed by the challenges presented by the pandemic. Our results also show a significant increase in the perceived intensification of work through COVID-19.

Overall, we could identify a general need to catch up in terms of technical/digital support and equipment among service providers and in schools, but also concerning the refugee children and young people themselves. Both teachers and service providers would like to see better and closer cooperation with – and generally more transparent – state support. The central problem for service providers can be identified in the digital barriers created by the lack of face-to-face contact and accessibility to refugees and their parents and guardians. The teachers mainly demand support with work beyond the pedagogical (e.g., psychological and social work, but also administrative tasks) so that they can concentrate on their core task: to teach.

As these findings stem from the earlier stage of the pandemic, when dynamics of sustained impact were probably still lurking around the corner, it would be interesting to follow up in a more mixed-methods manner to learn more about the first-hand experiences of education- and support staff. Additionally, the presented findings are shadowed by a presumable high internal heterogeneity of the investigated young refugees. Hence, further studies will do good to trace the young persons' age – and perhaps further person-specific features – more precisely, making more differentiated assertions possible. Using suitable methodological approaches, it would also be interesting to dive further into first-hand accounts of the children and young people themselves (e.g. in-depth information on refugee families with school-going children, refugee students' demands and issues beyond those directly experienced by teachers and education service providers) in order to better understand the dynamics of the impact of the pandemic on that specific group, presently and in the long term, with focus on the inequalities this situation has, does, and will cause.

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