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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Waiting in the Austrian asylum system: The well-being of asylum-seeking children in a phase of liminality

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the waiting period experienced by asylum-seeking children in Austria. We argue that this period can be defined as a 'phase of liminality' in which 'precarity' of asylum seekers is produced. The article analyses how children experience institutional settings that produce precarity in relation to their well-being. The aim is to contribute to a sound understanding of children's experiences while waiting for an asylum decision and to a child-centred perspective on children that focuses on their needs, wishes and agency. The article draws on 27 interviews with asylum-seeking children living in a basic services accommodation in Vienna, conducted in 2020 and 2021. The findings demonstrate the importance of listening to asylum-seeking children to support their well-being during this phase of liminality and implementing child-centred asylum policies that are responsive to children's well-being.

KEYWORDS

asylum system Austria, asylum-seeking children, liminality, precarity, waiting

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INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE PROBLEM

In addition to the 11 672 people who received asylum in Austria in 2021 (Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2021b) and the 2013 people who were in detention pending deportation as of 2020 (*Schubhaft*; Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2020), many others continue to wait for their asylum decisions in basic services accommodations (*Grundversorgungseinrichtungen*) and are excluded from official Austrian statistics during this time. This group often spends months waiting in these accommodations for a positive or negative asylum decision. Although a 2016 amendment to the Asylum Act (*Asylgesetz*) stipulates that an application decision must be made within 15 months, the Austrian asylum procedure remains slow compared to other European member states (AIDA, 2016, p. 9). In 2019, the Austrian Network for Children's Rights (Netzwerk Kinderrechte, 2019) described the decision-making period for asylum procedures as lasting at least 15 months for children and adults; in June 2019, 8045 asylum-seeking children applied for asylum in Austria, 7555 of whom were accompanied by adults (Fritsche et al., 2019, p. 24). Eule et al. (2019, pp. 149–150) conclude that the state regulates people's lives through everyday bureaucratic processes, such as lengthy administrative procedures for access to rights and benefits.

Within this context, we investigate how waiting times affect the well-being of asylum-seeking children in Austria. By well-being we mean feeling happy, safe and accepted, being cared for and protected, having private space and access to education, and being able to participate in decisions that concern one's life (Carboni & Morrow, 2011; Fattore et al., 2007, pp. 18–20). We argue that during the waiting time, children are in a ‘phase of liminality’, that is, an uncertain threshold period (Turner, 1967). Due to inadequate and absent policies, this leaves them in a situation of ‘precarity’ (Butler, 2004) that affects and potentially jeopardises their well-being. This article aims to enhance the holistic understanding of the impact of waiting for an asylum decision from a child-centred perspective and to propose a child-centred asylum policy, that is, a policy that focuses on children's well-being and strengthens their participation in the conceptualisation and orientation of policies (Gornik, 2020, p. 532). It incorporates responses from 27 qualitative interviews with asylum-seeking children living with family members in a Viennese basic services accommodation and was conducted as part of a work package of the EU H2020 project, Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe, (MiCREATE). Our research draws on a child-centred approach that recognises children as competent meaning-makers during the research process (Clark, 2005, p. 25). Therefore, we included children as active participants during our research (Mayeza, 2017). This participatory child-centred approach allowed them to report on their own subjective experiences and explain their well-being in their own words (Due et al., 2014, p. 210; Gornik & Sedmak, 2021, p. 102).

First, the article briefly introduces the Austrian asylum system with a focus on children. Next, we discuss the state of social scientific research on asylum-seeking children and child-centred approaches to identify the research gaps we will fill in this article. We subsequently introduce the study's theoretical foundations and methods. Finally, we discuss the results from our analysis and conclude with proposals for a child-centred approach to asylum in Austria.

ASYLUM FOR CHILDREN IN AUSTRIA: THE CONTEXT

The Austrian asylum system is based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the European Convention on Human Rights (1958), the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), the EU Procedural Guidelines (2013) and the National Asylum Act (2005). Austria signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child with a reservation of execution in 1992. The Federal Constitutional Act on

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the Rights of Children of 2011 (*Bundesverfassungsgesetz über die Rechte von Kindern*, BGB1. I Nr. 4/2011) ultimately established the principle of the 'welfare of the child' for all children in the country (Art. 1), which became a guideline for public and private authorities. The rights of the child, however, have not been sufficiently included in the asylum system.

Accompanied asylum-seeking children and their present family members are included within the family asylum procedure (§34 *AsylG*). Although Austrian authorities do not interrogate children under the age of 14, minors 14 and over can be interviewed separately from other family members (Kindeswohlkommission, 2021, p. 46). However, there are currently no special guidelines or qualifications for interviewing officials to ensure child-friendly procedures (Ibid.). Austria's approach to accommodating asylum seekers follows the Council of Europe directive (*Richtlinie* 2003/33/EU), which defines reception standards. In 2004, the Basic Welfare Support Agreement (*Grundversorgungsvereinbarung*, BGBl. I Nr. 80/2004) between the Federal Government of Austria (*Bund*) and its nine provinces (*Länder*) was established to regulate the (minimum) common standards of basic care and to maintain balance in the distribution of asylum seekers in Austria across *Länder*. Although the Vienna Basic Supply Act (*Wiener Grundversorgungsgesetz*, LGBl. Nr. 46/2004) mandates that the family unit must be preserved in the distribution process, little attention is paid to the special needs of asylum-seeking children. For example, there is no nationwide child-friendly quality criteria for basic care facilities (Kindeswohlkommission, 2021, p. 19). Likewise, the only minimum standard is that there must be a play area for children near the basic services accommodation (2. LandesflüchtlingsreferentInnenkonferenz, 2014).

Considering that most national integration policies begin after asylum status has been granted, the waiting period affords limited opportunities for adults and children. After the Austrian Constitutional Court overturned the provisions restricting the employment of asylum seekers as unlawful in 2021, adult asylum seekers can now apply for a work permit after a 3-month waiting period. However, an employment permit is required for them to take up employment. Before this is granted, the Public Employment Service checks in each individual case whether nationals, EEA citizens or 'advanced integrated' foreigners are registered who are willing and able to take up the activity in question (AMS, 2022). This means that access to the labour market remains difficult for asylum seekers.

Since Austria requires children to attend compulsory school for 9 years from the age of 6 (*Schulpflichtgesetz*, BGBl. Nr. 76/1985), asylum-seeking children may attend school. This is in line with the principle of equal treatment from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. School transportation costs and school materials for asylum-seeking children are paid for and provided by the responsible *Land* (Grundversorgungsinfo, 2018). Since new German-language support classes (*Deutschförderklassen*) were implemented in 2018/2019, most asylum-seeking children are classified as atypical students due to their limited language skills and must attend separate classes to learn German (Bundesministerium für Bildung, 2021). This results in children spending less time in regular classes, which leads to difficulties for some children in making friends of the same age (MiCREATE, 2021, p. 6). In general, the Austrian Child Welfare Commission (*Kindeswohlkommission*) has criticised the lack of nationwide policies and standards that ensure the best interests of the child (2021, p. 38).

STATE OF RESEARCH

A growing body of literature focuses on asylum-seeking children (Bhabha, 2014; Bhabha et al., 2018; Glawischnig, 2018; Pruitt, 2021) and pays particularly attention to unaccompanied minors (Alemi & James, 2019; Bassermann & Spiegelfeld, 2018; Clayton et al., 2019; Edlins & Larrison, 2020; Kanics et al., 2010; Koppenberg, 2014; Sedmak et al., 2018; Zschirnt, 2011). This includes some existing

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research for Austria (Dursun & Sauer, 2018, 2021), yet there is scarce literature about asylum-seeking children who arrive with their families. The existing literature primarily focuses on government practices, limited access to services, social welfare practices and family psychosocial problems (Giner, 2007; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Sime & Fox, 2015; Wiegersma et al., 2011). Research demonstrates that asylum-seeking children who live with their families are typically viewed as an 'appendix' to their families instead of the individual owners of rights (Fritsche et al., 2019, pp. 227–230). Other work focuses on waiting for asylum decisions. In this context, Whyte (2011) describes the insecurity and sense of invisibility experienced by asylum seekers during their time waiting for asylum. By contrast, Rotter's (2016, p. 6) ethnographic research asks to what extent waiting is just an empty interlude and concludes that waiting can entail intentionality, action and potential. In the same vein, Nimführ (2016) demonstrates vulnerability as well as agency among non-removable rejected asylum seekers. Additionally, Schwarz (2015) shows that waiting in detention may provoke detained migrants to engage in tactical and strategic behaviours to improve their own living conditions. Sutton et al. (2011) note that waiting for asylum might be associated with hope, but also impatience, anger, fear, insecurity and anxiety—particularly among asylum seekers who risk being expelled from the new country. The authors show that asylum seekers cannot avoid this waiting period and must simply endure it (Ibid., pp. 30–32).

Comparatively little research exists about children who are waiting for asylum, although existing literature stresses the consequences of boredom and children's agency experienced during this time (Kohli & Kaukko, 2018; Vitus & Liden, 2010). These insights led to the emergence of child-centred approaches to this group of asylum seekers. While the literature has expanded its focus on children's rights and child centredness (e.g. Clark & Moss, 2005; Fattore et al., 2007), research about asylum-seeking children with a child-centred approach is still at its early stages (Gornik, 2020). Within this context, our article is interested in how waiting for asylum specifically affects the well-being of asylum-seeking children who came to Austria with their families. We therefore aim to explore children's experiences and feelings during the asylum decision waiting time. Furthermore, we argue that a child-centred approach is required—both methodologically as well as in policies—to address minors' needs and rights of children as children and as asylum seekers. Compared to other EU countries, Austria's waiting time for asylum is relatively long and, arguably, arbitrarily organised. This, combined with a nationwide lack of measures and standards to ensure the best interests of the child, make Austria a good case study.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

To answer our research questions, we combine theories of waiting, liminality and precarity to reveal how waiting time affects asylum-seeking children's well-being in Austria and point to the necessity of a child-centred approach. *Waiting* can take on various forms: for example, passive waiting, that is, waiting patiently, where one can anticipate the outcome; active waiting, that is, waiting hopefully despite uncertainty about the outcome (Marcel, 1967, pp. 280–282). On the one hand, waiting time can be seen as wasteful 'dead time' or a 'timepass' (Manpreet & Bandak, 2018, p. xiii). On the other hand, it can lead to creativity and excitement and thus generate positive outcomes (Sellerberg, 2008, pp. 350, 359). However, the 'politics of waiting', creates 'particular forms of subjectivities' (Manpreet & Bandak, 2018, p. 3), while waiting is simultaneously a technology of governance (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 228). Nevertheless, those who must wait should not be reduced to victims, because they can also actively shape the politics of waiting (Procupez, 2015, pp. 56–64). Thus, focusing on waiting introduces nuanced perspectives when studying the diverse potentials

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within the same group of people at different times, in different places and in different situations (Manpreet & Bandak, 2018, p. 25). When discussing asylum seekers, Manpreet and Bandak highlight how they must endure both temporal and spatial waiting, that is, in the sense of being spatially fixed within the waiting place. Therefore, accommodations for asylum seekers are arguably a separate waiting zone that exists outside of society and contrasts with the multiple speeds, mobilities and temporalities within society (Ibid., p. 7).

In reference to Van Gennep, Turner (1967, pp. 93–95) introduces the '*liminal*' stage or 'intrastructural situations' as concepts that describe transition in Van Gennep's rites of passage. Likewise, Sutton et al. (2011, pp. 30–32) apply Van Gennep's three stages and Turner's liminality to asylum seekers awaiting residency status. During the initial separation phase, individuals move away from their respective countries of origin upon entering the destination country. The second, liminal stage entails applying for asylum status in the destination country, while asylum has been received upon entering the incorporation phase (Sutton et al., 2011, pp. 30–32). Since asylum seekers lack residence status while being (geographically) separated from their country of origin, they experience an 'in-between situation of everyday life' (Sellerberg, 2008, p. 359). Although the liminal phase is necessarily a negative stage, it is often shrouded in mystery, uncertainty and ambiguity due to the in-betweenness of the situation. Building on O'Reilly (2018, p. 831), who emphasises that waiting for asylum represents a temporal experience of liminality, we conceptualise the waiting phase in the context of asylum as a liminal phase. This perspective of waiting as liminality promotes exploring the everyday negative and positive experiences of—in our case—underage asylum seekers who spend extended periods of time in such liminal spaces (Ibid., p. 822).

Judith Butler distinguishes between a general 'precariousness of life' and *precarity*; that is, a 'politically conditioned state in which certain population groups suffer from failing social and economic support networks and are exposed to injuries, violence and death in different ways' (Butler, 2010, p. 25). Precarity indicates the fragility and powerlessness of human existence, processes of dehumanisation in the face of repressive, everyday governmentality and thus a form of violence (Butler, 2004, p. 34). Furthermore, normative schemes of intelligibility refer to norms that define who counts as human and who does not, and who is recognised as a rights holder or perceived as an 'Other' (Ibid., p. 146). In this regard, Butler emphasises that certain lives are prioritised over others. Recognition can humanise the 'Others', and acknowledge them as a human (Ibid., p. 43). The lack of recognition towards asylum-seeking children's fundamentally precarious life serves as a starting point for analysing domination, namely of a politics of precarisation (Lorey, 2012). Accordingly, it is important to consider the choices and social practices that protect certain lives, but not others, wherein the latter experience precarity.

To summarise, we are interested in how precarity emerges in spaces and times of waiting for asylum and how asylum-seeking children experience precarity and thus unpredictability, insecurity and vulnerability during the stage of liminality. Furthermore, we use precarity to examine how political structures and processes of asylum—politics of precarisation—produce precarity and, hence, precarious subjectivity.

The three concepts of waiting, liminality and precarity enable a deeper understanding of asylum-seeking children as in-between existences while waiting for asylum. We are interested in how asylum-seeking children experience themselves in the spatial and temporal waiting zone. Which feelings do they connect to the space and asylum waiting period? These feelings may affect and threaten their well-being, but can also lead to self-reflection and (collective) empowerment. We combine the three analytical concepts with the normative approach to well-being and child centredness: children's well-being includes feelings of security, happiness and being cared for, as well as having private spaces and access to education (Fattore et al., 2007). Therefore, a child-centred approach respects

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these criteria for well-being. Gornik (2020, pp. 536–539) defines five characteristics of child-centred policies: (1) incorporating knowledge about children's experiences; (2) acknowledging the child's current well-being; (3) involving children in policy development; (4) including them in a broader social context and (5) the centrality of child-centred education. Accordingly, it is essential to recognise that during this liminal period, children's well-being requires dedicated support from child-centred policies that can strengthen their well-being, recognise their feelings and build on their acquired knowledge (Ibid., p. 533). To accomplish this, our study examines the lack of child-centred policies or traces thereof, that is, measures that either take or do not take children's feelings and well-being into account, which might increase precarity or empowerment. Furthermore, we intentionally used a child-centred methodology.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Our methodology is based on a child-centred approach, dedicated efforts were made to incorporate it into each methodological step. Thus, we included children in preparing and implementing the methods. In other words, we went beyond perceiving them as participants about whom we were researching, but also researched with them. Likewise, we asked for their opinions on the research process, including whether the interview questions were good and understandable.

We chose a mixed-methods approach to capture the socio-political processes in which asylum-seeking children are embedded and their waiting experiences. This included observations and fieldnotes, narrative interviews with children and informal conversations with parents and social workers. These were conducted between March 2020 and July 2021 (with an interruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic) in a temporary basic services accommodation in Vienna. We contacted the children exclusively through their legal guardians and/or the management at the basic services accommodation where they were housed. Informed consent was acquired from the children and their legal guardians prior to the interviews and all children were granted full anonymity; we thus use pseudonyms in the article (i.e. age, gender). Furthermore, we consulted a child psychologist for advice on the appropriateness of our interview questions. This study included interviews with 27 children who were between 7 and 17 years old at the time and came from Chechnya, Georgia, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan; 18 participants were female and nine were male. Some had been waiting in Austria for up to 3 years without an asylum decision, while others had only recently arrived.

According to our theoretical foundation, we were interested in the children's feelings in different places and at different times, as well as their agency, relations to friends, family and teachers. During the interviews, we therefore asked them about their general lives in transit, institutional support received, well-being, feelings during different activities, future plans and school life. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using topic-centred content analysis with *MAXQDA*. Applying an inductive approach, we developed categories from our text material to capture the diversity of topics and their interrelatedness. Observations and informal conversations were recorded in field notes and served as supporting contextual information.

WAITING, LIMINALITY AND PRECARITY IN THE AUSTRIAN ASYLUM SYSTEM: MAIN RESEARCH RESULTS

The lives of children who are waiting for asylum are shaped by their surroundings, families, relatives and friends, but even more so by asylum policies, related basic care measures and education policies.

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Therefore, we examined different dimensions of waiting to provide a holistic perspective of how waiting for asylum in Austria impacts children. We shed light on the children's experience of liminality in relation to their families, the basic services accommodations where they live and the schools they attend.

The following section is structured according to the three themes that asylum-seeking children mentioned most often in interviews. In terms of well-being, participants most frequently mentioned their families, accommodations and the schools they attended. These themes reflect studies on children's perceptions of well-being, which also focus on the importance children place on people, physical spaces and activities in their lives (Fattore et al., 2007). Furthermore, the section highlights the structures and policies that shape children's 'individual time' (Eule et al., 2019), which they experience while waiting for asylum, and what it means to be in an in-between situation. We combined these three spaces with the three concepts of waiting, liminality and precarity. Our aim is to show the extent to which Austrian policies produce precarity and thus negatively impact children's well-being. The section concludes with a discussion of the results and findings in relation to liminality, precarity and well-being, as well as a proposal for child-centred asylum policies.

Children's experiences of liminality to family

The interviews largely showed that the children and family members with whom they shared their accommodations got along well, as one participant described: 'I love my mommy and daddy' (10, female). Another child emphasised that she was happy when it was Mother's Day and Father's Day because she could give them presents (8, female). Many of the families housed in these accommodations consisted of children who were close in age and, as observed during the field research, often played together. Additionally, being able to communicate in their first language gave them a sense of security and normality. Hence, the surroundings of familiar people allowed the children to experience this stage of liminality, that is, living in the basic services accommodation, as a safe place.

However, when discussing adult family members and their chances for economic and linguistic–cultural integration, the children's negative experiences of liminality became obvious. These adults have restricted labour market access, while Austrian integration measures like language courses or educational measures are only available to those eligible for asylum and subsidiary protection. This traps adult asylum seekers in their accommodations indefinitely with little to do. During our visits to the basic services accommodation, we observed adult asylum seekers having more difficulties understanding and speaking German than the children. Therefore, the children—who at least had the opportunity to learn German at school—often had to help and act as translators. One interviewee emphasised: 'well, I read with my father. […] And yes, we also teach our parents German and so' (10, male). This shows that many children have developed a responsibility for their family members, which leads to a role reversal between children and parents. The interviews revealed that children recognise their parents' sadness, anxiety and despair, and subsequently developed negative feelings towards this situation. One child explained that she does not ask about her parents' well-being 'because then I get sad (clears throat) because they are almost always miserable. Then I also get sad and think about it' (12, female). The 'stuckness' that the aforementioned restrictive measures triggered in the adults and their resulting consequences thus drove the children into a situation of precarity as they realised their families' insecurity, which denies them a carefree childhood.

Furthermore, many children did not live with all of their beloved family members in the basic services accommodation, since other family members either stayed in their country of origin or were still in transit countries. As long as asylum seekers remain in the liminal phase, that is, waiting for

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asylum, their mobility is restricted and family reunification is not possible. Some of the children expressed missing family members who were still in their country of origin and whom they had not seen for months or years. For example, one child stated that she wanted to return to her country of origin, where her father is, because she missed him (12, female). Another child stressed that having a passport was important to 'go to our country and see our people and then come back' (13, male). However, the ongoing asylum procedure prohibits asylum-seeking children and their families from travelling outside of Austria and receiving 'convention passports' or 'foreign passports' (Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2021a). Additionally, the lengthy family reunification process cannot be initiated without asylum status (Netzwerk Kinderrechte, 2019). To amend this type of situation and the accompanying feelings of hopelessness that arise for children without local important or familiar contact persons, Netzwerk Kinderrechte (2019, pp. 46–47) stresses that family reunification should be a benevolent, humane and expeditious process. Thus, children seeking asylum should at least be given the chance to be reunited with their nuclear families.

The interviews indicated that the situation of not being able to travel placed a strain on the children and could trigger immense psychological stress: 'and because of that, I can, I am sometimes sad and cry because they [the brothers] are away from me, yes then I am sad' (12, female). Children are precarised by Austrian legislation; they experience precarity from a lack of opportunities to cope with these stress factors, for example, a social network that provides children with emotional support. During this waiting time, the children could use technology to stay in touch with their families: 'I miss [them], but I talk to [them] on my cell phone' (11, female). For many, however, it remained uncertain when they would receive a passport that would allow them to travel, see family members or when family reunification would be granted and carried out. Consequently, waiting time was mainly accompanied by feelings of sadness, uncertainty and powerlessness.

Children's experiences of liminality in the basic services accommodation

The children perceived the living conditions in the basic services accommodation as more pleasant compared to previous ones—both inside and outside of Austria. Regarding his former accommodations during flight, one interviewee emphasised: 'well, I had a school when I was in the camp, but it was bad. There you didn't even get money and only bad things. There was a house where there was food' (10, male).

Nevertheless, as long as the children do not have asylum status, they have to live in the accommodations with their families. This space is a place of precarisation and precarity, as indicated by UNHCR's call for Austria's introduction of mandatory, uniform, nationwide quality standards for the accommodation, care and support of beneficiaries—as well as improved quality assurance, including effective monitoring and complaints mechanisms (UNHCR, 2013, pp. 5–6). Although Austrian guidelines state that basic services accommodations must provide at least 8 m^2 of space for one person and 4 m^2 for each additional person (Dachverband Wiener Sozialeinrichtungen, 2018, p. 21), the children interviewed mentioned the lack of space and privacy in the Vienna accommodation. One child told us that she slept in the same room as her other siblings, that always woke up when another got up, and that she could not fall back asleep afterwards (10, female). Another interviewee mentioned that he shared a bedroom with his three sisters and mother. Because his youngest sister was still a baby, she cried a lot at night, which woke him up often (13, male). Additionally, the children particularly emphasised not wanting to share their apartment with another family: 'because we also wanted when we, when we take a shower then we so nobody can open it and so with other family and want to open it or we didn't want to have any argument […]. And we just wanted to be alone. To study in peace and

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so' (10, male). Thus, some dreamed of owning an own house: 'so it [the house] has many rooms and everything so nice. And in the garden, everything has flowers and a swimming pool and so. And four rooms for sleeping, so three for my sister, my two brothers with everything' (11, female).

From the children's perspectives, the basic services accommodation represented their liminal situation. The accommodation symbolises that the asylum seekers are no longer on a journey—they already arrived in Austria—but have not yet received the asylum status needed to organise their own way of living with their parents or relatives. Although the accommodation provides basic services, its poor living conditions creates insecurity and precarity.

During our fieldwork, we observed many posters throughout the accommodation that addressed the asylum seekers with the word 'clients', and its social workers had offices in the same space. One the one hand, this makes the basic services accommodation a public care institution that delivers important services to asylum seekers. On the other hand, being called a client underlines the asylum seekers' liminality: although they considered their apartment within the accommodation to be their home, the apartment did not belong to them; rather, they were only living there temporarily because of their waiting status. The accommodation illustrates how asylum seekers are disciplined in this liminal phase and symbolises the 'power over life' (Katz, 2017) that prevents them from building a life in a new place according to their preferences. In particular, house rules reinforced the discipline carried out by the basic services accommodation, such as (unexpected) visits from social workers or needing permission to sleep elsewhere. According to the Austrian Basic Care Agreement (*Grundversorgungsvereinbarung*), basic care assistance can be restricted or withdrawn if a person grossly violates the accommodations' house rules (Koppenberg, 2014, pp. 31–32). This threat translates into another example of precarity by constantly reminding asylum seekers of their non-existent 'normal' housing and living situations in Austria, which runs counter to their customary autonomy (Goffman, 2016, p. 45).

The children also reported negative experiences with their neighbours at the accommodation, with one describing how a neighbour regularly insulted her mother for wearing a headscarf (9, female). Another child stressed: 'and when we go into the backyard, the neighbour says he's going to call the police or something' (13, male). The same child concluded that the neighbours—who were not asylum seekers—were against them for not being from Austria. In response, he expressed that he would like to be accepted by the neighbours (13, male). Other interviews revealed similar examples of how the children suffered from non-acceptance.

This demonstrates that the lack of policies and measures that sustainably sensitise for and combat racism lead to a precarisation of 'being different' or 'othered'. Racism engenders exclusion from segments of society, which for asylum seekers means being constantly reminded that they are 'neither here nor there', thereby maintaining their position within a liminal space (Nimführ, 2016, p. 258). Discriminatory experiences may negatively impact children's self-image and self-esteem and increase their social insecurity and psychological stress (Brown, 2015, p. 1).

Children's experiences of liminality at school

As our interviews indicated, the school environment in which asylum-seeking children are embedded can foster social security. Asylum-seeking children emphasised the importance of school in their lives, and how they enjoyed being with their schoolfriends and teachers. When asked how they felt, two children each responded: 'everything is good for me […] because I go to school' (11, female; 7, male). Another pupil expressed: 'the best thing in Vienna is […] [t]he school' (10, male).

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Nevertheless, the children received greater attention to their German language skills at school, which reminded them of their liminal status. Education policy and integration measures consider learning German as its main pillar, which is implemented, for example, through German-language support classes (Alpagu et al., 2019, p. 220). Asylum-seeking children reported negative school experiences: 'Yes, it is very difficult because of German' (10, female). Another told us: 'well, I'm afraid. Yes, I really don't understand German that well' (10, male). Accordingly, they aspired to improve their German skills: 'because of German, I can't speak German so well and I have bad grades. I have to get better' (12, male). Integration school policy that primarily focuses on acquiring German language skills places stress on the children, leading them to suffer from possessing 'insufficient' language skills. Nevertheless, some children were eager to improve their German skills to escape this situation, including those who described making a special effort, studying during vacations and attending summer schools. Generally speaking, our interviews show that this disciplinary and exclusionary educational policy does not take asylum-seeking children's well-being into account. This is because it devalues their first languages, the school environment is stressful, and children do not feel like they are being taken care of—especially in the separate German classes. Therefore, this measure intensifies the precarisation of asylum-seeking children.

The currently available educational resources meant to improve the German language skills of asylum-seeking children reflect the liminality of their situation. Because they live with fellow asylum seekers, they have few opportunities to learn German. Likewise, their parents can rarely help them with language acquisition, since there are no state-subsidised language courses for asylum-seeking adults. Additionally, since asylum-seeking families only receive 200€ for school materials per school year (Grundversorgungsinfo, 2018), there are few options for hiring private tutors for the children. Hence, the liminal phase lacks the necessary resources to support each child according to their individual needs, which produces precarity and has further negative impacts on their well-being.

Waiting, liminality and precarity: The lack of a child-centred approach in the Austrian asylum system

Our observations and interviews identified a lack of child centredness in the Austrian asylum system. The relatively lengthy waits for asylum decisions and living in a transitional accommodation create a liminal phase of insecurity and precarity that is too long. This discourages children and prevents them from organising their lives—alongside their families—as they wish. Waiting time and space creates a seemingly never-ending stage of liminality, which transforms living at the basic services accommodation into an experience of precarity: some children are separated from beloved family members and are not allowed to travel to them; they are trapped in Austria. Moreover, few children can receive support from their parents or accompanying adults, since they face even greater precarity due labour market restrictions and the absence of German-learning resources. Therefore, some children are forced to take care of adults instead of being taken care of. Likewise, the limited housing conditions mean that children often lack private space, including at night. While most enjoy school and learning the German language, they feel pressure at Austrian schools to learn German as quickly as possible while experiencing the devaluation of their first languages. Asylum-seeking children suffer from receiving minimal social benefits, psychological stress and from their parents feeling useless. Above all, they suffer from the absence of security and stability towards their futures, which leads to a lack of self-determination and participation in social life. As a result, the children suffer from the fear of not being accepted and from not belonging. These feelings can intensify as the liminal period

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is prolonged, especially because of the uncertainty over its end, that is, when the children will be granted asylum.

To conclude, our empirical data demonstrate that the waiting phase is accompanied by sadness, insecurity and vulnerability until children receive asylum, and can therefore be classified as a liminal phase of precarity. While basic needs are secured in Austria, restrictive asylum laws and policies impose many limitations that affect access to important, socially relevant resources. These include the lack of opportunities for family reunification, disciplinary measures in basic services accommodations and insufficient financial resources. This shows that the general well-being of asylum-seeking children is not recognised in the Austrian asylum system, which therefore lacks a child-centred approach. Asylum-seeking children are not provided the opportunity to participate in decisions over their lives or to express what is important to them—neither at the basic services accommodation, nor at schools. Hence, they are not seen as independent rights holders. These circumstances could lead to powerlessness and thus create a state of precarity. Ultimately, precarity is not only created by the basic standards of living, but also by powerlessness, insecurity and uncertainty. Defining children's problems from their perspective, therefore, seems to be a first step towards realising a child-centred approach (Gornik, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis shows that asylum-seeking children exist in a liminal phase: waiting for asylum without knowing when this phase will end, that is, when they will be granted asylum. Therefore, children suffer from difficult life circumstances during the waiting period, as this phase is characterised by feelings of uncertainty, sadness, powerlessness and immobility. Numerous political restrictions contribute to this, such as limited resources and rights, which we have shown affect children's well-being and can lead to the emergence of precarity. By combining the concepts of waiting, liminality and precarity, our analysis revealed both the lack of children's well-being and child-centred policies in the Austrian asylum system.

Child-centred asylum policies should align the distribution of resources and rights with the best interests of children and thus promote their well-being. Moreover, we conclude that our data demonstrates the importance of establishing child-centred asylum policies that account for different dimensions of waiting, as highlighted in this article. This includes acknowledging the different ways that waiting impacts asylum-seeking children in order to protect and support them as a particularly vulnerable group during a precarious time. It is especially important to include their needs and wishes into asylum policies to make the waiting conditions more child friendly and to shorten the waiting process itself. Moreover, it seems prudent to heed the needs and wishes of children and their everyday knowledge when conceptualising asylum policies for living at basic services accommodation and learning at schools.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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