

Youth Partnership

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“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe”

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Individual Paper:

“From camp to campus: good practices from teachers and youth workers in Greece regarding the access of refugee students to education”

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Abstract

In October 2015, the Joint Council on Youth adopted a [Statement on the refugee crisis in Europe](#) where, the Joint Council reminds the relevant Council of Europe bodies to encourage national governments and civil society organisations of the vital role of *education as a means of addressing and tackling discrimination, segregation and marginalisation, as well as promoting the values of tolerance, respect and dignity.*

In September 2016, refugee students entered Greek schools after a special agreement signed with the EU, whereby it was foreseen that refugees would remain in Greek territory. The children’s presence caused reactions from parents and the clergy, who saw in these new arrivals an alleged danger for the public health and national cohesion. At some cases, refugee children were even prevented from entering schools. Greek NGOs working at a grassroots level have been playing a vital role in lifting stereotypes and together with educational practitioners they have been safeguarding the access of refugee children into Greek schools. The present paper provides good practices from two primary schools in Thessaloniki (a conventional and an intercultural* one), selected by the Greek government to host refugee children. In the particular schools, NGOs have been collaborating with the educational and administrative staff in order to bring refugee children from the camp to the classroom; furthermore, non-formal learning tools and techniques are being implemented alongside with the formal curriculum in order to emotionally prepare local and

refugee children for their co-existence and to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding in the classroom.

At a second level, the paper will comment on a void existing at the educational system with regards to the situation of young refugee students, for whom very few provisions have been made. In 2014 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted the report and [resolution 1996 \(2014\)](#) “Migrant Children: What Rights as 18?”. The document highlights the lamentable fact that *young refugees and asylum-seekers between 18 and 25 are not acknowledged as a group with specific needs and the transition from one policy regime to the next can be particularly harsh*” (Council of Europe, 2016). Refugee students face a number of problems, from linguistic barriers to bureaucracy, as well as lack of equivalence between institutions providing education and unrecognition of scholar titles. Furthermore, instances of discrimination and potential conflict with the local community add to their emotional trauma inflicted by war, loss and separation. This situation calls for radical reforms. The youth sector could play a vital role in facilitating refugee students’ access to education and vocational training. The paper will explore good practices in the field from the work of NGOs, discuss success stories and reflect on possible solutions.

Background

In February 2016, as a result of Greece’s agreement with the EU, the Greek ministry of Education announced its willingness to implement an educational reform to address the new needs that had emerged from the presence of a large number of refugees in the Greek territory. Greece had experimented with several educational reforms in the last decades in an attempt to integrate immigrants, asylum seekers or expatriates coming mainly from the former USSR and the neighbouring Balkan countries (Mousiadou, 2014: 157). The so-called “intercultural” elements, however, that had been added to the formal educational system had been nothing but a success, mainly for the following reasons: they had been sporadic, arbitrary and inconsistent; furthermore, instead of promoting intercultural dialogue, they tended either to isolate the “other” students or to inflict sympathy by portraying them as a vulnerable or less competent minority group (Μουσιάδου 2014: 156-158). Young migrants from the previous decades managed to integrate in the system mainly because they had a strong desire to do so (Φίλης σε Καθημερινή 2016); moving to Greece had been a conscious choice for most of them, a choice which had been driven by the dream of a better future in a country with better good economic straits and professional opportunities compared to where they were coming from. Many of these people had emotional or family bonds with Greece and embraced this land a second home. The refugee crisis, however, differs greatly from the migratory wave of the previous decades; violent in its nature, it consists the second largest displacement of people since the second world war (UNCHR 2014). The people affected bear the trauma of war and loss (Sanders 2016), aggravated by the skepticism and suspicion expressed by Europeans, a large number of which interpreted this sudden influx of people as an “invasion” (Bello

2016: 4). Concerning Greece, in particular, refugees cannot be parallelized with previous migrants, firstly because they have not voluntarily entered Greece (which for them was supposed to be a transit country on the way to more prosperous, western European countries) and secondly, because the majority of these people bear no connections with the Greek land, language and civilization. The news that they would have to “temporarily” remain to Greece was a shock for many refugees, who felt trapped in a place where the effects of the ongoing financial crisis are intensely felt in all aspects of the local economy and society. Their despair was manifested in acts of vandalism that took place at refugee camps and which targeted mainly Greek authorities. Although the vast majority of locals had shown active solidarity to refugees since the beginning of their odyssey, the instances of violence caused many locals to have second thoughts and prepared the ground for scaremongers and demagogues to start portraying “foreigners” as a threat to safety, public health, economy and homogeneity. Xenophobia can easily lead to hate and hatred is a vicious circle that affects all parties and knows no reason. This turbulent situation called for educational practitioners to uptake the role of mediators and peace-makers; it also meant that the educational system cried for a meaningful, in-depth reform, which would truly serve the purposes and functions of intercultural dialogue. In order for this goal to be reached, teachers and headmasters would have to try out something which had been traditionally considered to be a taboo in formal education: they would have to concretely collaborate with representatives of the non-formal education sector and also, consciously and systematically implement non-formal learning techniques in the classroom.

The adventurous access of refugee students to Greek schools

The European Commission’s Education and Training Monitor published in November 2016, calls for Member States “to make their education systems more relevant and inclusive, in particular regarding the integration of newly arrived refugees and migrants” (EU Monitor 2016). According to the same report, Greece has been one of the member states which had reduced their spending on Education in 2014 compared to 2013. Education, however, has emerged as one of the most important pillars in the management of the refugee crisis. The [Statement on the refugee crisis in Europe](#) adopted by the Joint Council on Youth in October 2015 stresses

“the fundamental importance of education as a means of addressing and tackling discrimination, segregation and marginalisation, as well as promoting the values of tolerance, respect and dignity” (JCY 2015).

The refugee issue in Greece meant that the Greek state would have to invest in education and youth in order to address a new and unprecedented situation, the management of which would require new techniques and a change of mindset.

In the summer of 2016, the Greek government launched a call for educational practitioners with intercultural competences in order to meet the new needs that would follow the entry of refugee children into Greek schools. This initiative was followed by a number of measures which aimed at facilitating the access of refugee children

not only in education, but also in society. For the first time, local authorities worked closely with representatives from both the formal and the non-formal educational sector. It is worth mentioning that in Greece non-formal education is not recognised, meaning that the work of people active in the field, especially at grass roots level, such as youth workers, street workers or youth leaders is not institutionalised, with all the implications that this fact entails. It also needs to be stressed that this collaboration depended on initiatives launched by local authorities, the youth sector / local NGOs and of course, citizens.

During the months following the shutting down of the refugee camps in Idomeni, refugees were moved to Thessaloniki. Camps were designed in areas near and inside the city, where refugees would have access to descent living conditions. In the next months, local authorities worked together with NGOs in order to renovate unused buildings and create affordable apartments for families. Except for facilitating refugees' access to basic human needs, the youth sector plays a vital role in providing education for children. Especially appointed teachers were firstly sent to refugee camps, where the lesson was conducted in tents. Their work was complemented by creative activities organised by local NGOs, which visited the camps regularly. Facilitators used a number of non-formal learning techniques to reach to young children, who often spoke nothing but Arabic and who had never had a similar learning experience before, given that many of them had failed to attend school as a result of the war. A creative tool was the "mobile school"; an ambulant vehicle equipped like a mini-school, aiming at reaching children not having access to education.

The joint work of teachers and trainers had multiple objectives: to prepare children for entering the local community; to foster intercultural dialogue and lift stereotypes and prejudices emerging from cultural differences; to prevent issues of ghettoisation which had started flourishing in refugee camps; to socialise children and alleviate the trauma inflicted by loss, violence and separation.

With the beginning of the school year, it was the youth sector again that collaborated with local authorities and headmasters in order to bring refugee children to school. The Greek state had made provisions, according to which refugee children would enter schools like all local students, but would be offered extra tutoring in subjects such as English, Greek and Mathematics. The school that each child would attend would depend on their area or residence.

The research

The hereby research was conducted in Thessaloniki between September and November 2016 and follows the refugee children's passing from camps to school. The research was conducted in two schools:

A conventional primary school, located in Neapoli-Sykies.

An intercultural school* located in Evosmos-Eleftherio Kordelio, consisting primary and high school.

These neighbourhoods (and consequently the specific schools) were selected for the following reasons:

They constitute areas which have traditionally been hosting immigrants and refugees, as well as a number of ethnic groups such as Roma populations. Due to the low cost of rents, these days they host a large number of refugee families from Syria and other countries affected by the war. They constitute challenging areas in the sense that they exhibit high percentages of young delinquency, ghettoisation and other issues connected with poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities. Local authorities and NGOs have played a vital role in upgrading the area by improving living conditions and young people's access to social rights through a number of projects aiming at supporting youth, education, health and sports.

The methodology of the research was based on qualitative tools and specifically:

- Field visits at schools, NGOs, refugee camps and refugee residencies.
- Interviews: with educational practitioners (teachers, university professors/researchers and headmasters), representatives of the non-formal sector (NGO spokespeople, project managers, street workers, youth workers, volunteers), local authorities working in the youth sector (Mayor and municipal counselors).
- Silent observation in the classroom and at school facilities.
- Active participation in the classroom as a guest tutor.
- Interaction with children and parents during school breaks.
- Following relative developments at the local media.

The circle of “trust”

The word trust is a key notion in this journey. It was a word repeatedly used by teachers working at schools with refugee children and also, by the streetworkers of the Arsis NGO, who had to gain the refugee parents' trust in order to get their children to school. The foundations of trust were first laid at the refugee camps, where youth workers reached families in order to ask for their permission to let their children participate in creative activities. When the school year started, the “Arsis” group safeguarded the children's entry into Greek schools. They reached families with interpreters, they helped them out with registration procedures and accommodation in the neighbourhood, accompanied parents and children to school so as to introduce them to the teaching staff. At a daily basis, a youth worker accompanies young children to school and then makes sure that they will return safe back home. The refugee students entered classrooms with their UNHCR backpacks, notebooks and pencils. Special welcoming classes were set up in order to help refugee children catch up with the rest of the class. Provisions have also been made for extra intensive classes after school. There were cases of 9 or 10-year-old children who had never had the experience of attending a class; the war had deprived them of their right to education. On the other hand, non-formal workshops organised in youth centers and

NGO facilities aim at socialising children and promoting intercultural dialogue and human rights.

The municipality has played a vital role in the inclusion of refugee children and their families. Either by means of the municipal bodies and services, or through an active collaboration with NGOs, the Municipality has facilitated the refugees' access to housing, health care, clothing and food.

Outcomes of the research

The inclusion of refugee children in the Greek educational system -and consequently in the local society- has been a challenge due to a number of factors. Firstly, the official integration process launched by the state has been unsystematic and disorganized; bureaucracy and lack of relative experience has taken its toll. The internal reconstruction of the ruling party in November 2016 and the consequent re-distribution of tasks has also blurred the image; it is not certain whether measures announced in the past by the former minister of Education, Nikos Filis will be implemented by the new minister,

Mutual suspicion and ignorance in locals and refugees also block the road to education. Interviews with both teachers and workers at the NGOs have shown that a number of refugee families see no point in their children entering Greek schools and creating bonds with the country, given that for them Greece is not their final destination. (At the specific paper, we will *not* refer to the burning issue of unaccompanied minors or to children coming from troubled families, although these are severe factors preventing them from accessing education and social care.) On the other hand, the arrival of refugee children in Greek schools has not always been a peaceful process. In the beginning of the school year, there had been cases where parents either boycotted the refugees' entry by protesting in the yards of schools which had been selected by the government to host refugees, or refused to send their own children to class, claiming that refugee children are potential carriers of transmittable diseases, despite the fact that the Greek Ministry of Education had officially announced that all refugee children had been vaccinated before entering schools. Certain members of the clergy have also been inciting parents' resistance by picturing refugees as a disguised menace to the Greek-orthodox religion and Christian ideals.

At their vast majority, refugee children and their families are positive towards schooling. The same is true for local families and local students. Refugee children exhibit zeal in learning and becoming part of the community. At the same time, teachers have played a vital role in refugee students' being accepted as equals by the rest of the class. Children who have had the opportunity to attend school back in their home countries exhibit a satisfactory level of English, as well as artistic skills, such as drawing or singing. Even for parents who are not interested in living permanently in Greece, school attendance is encouraged as a tool to keep children away from ghettos and for making them more social and extrovert. On the other hand, students coming from families that do not see any gains in education are the ones exhibiting low performance and disengagement. NGOs play a vital role in bringing refugee children to school or to the youth center, either by convincing parents of the value of

education and socialization, or by reminding them of the legal implications of not sending their children to school.

A void has been located in the situation of young refugees aged between 18-24. Although provisions have been made by the state for younger refugee students, the image is blur concerning the future of young people who are in the transition to adulthood or who were forced to interrupt their university studies due to the war. Concerning the case of Thessaloniki, the data of the Arsis and the U.S.B. NGOs show that for young refugees on the edge of adulthood, employment is a priority over higher education. Young people seek for ways to financially support themselves and their families. Research conducted among refugees in Northern Greece and the Balkans (Drosopoulos 2016) has shown that for many young refugees, the way to autonomy does not necessarily pass through education, which is often costly and time consuming.

For the management of the refugee crisis, the collaboration of all sectors active in the youth field is necessary. The Greek example shows that in these unknown waters, solutions can come from personal initiative, the sensibilisation of local authorities and citizens and an efficient collaboration with NGOs at a local and international level.

Thessaloniki is also an excellent example of how non-formal learning techniques, tools and kits have been employed in the formal education system in order to address linguistic, cultural and emotional challenges.

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