

Youth Partnership

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“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the Role of Youth Work in Integrating Young Refugees in Europe”

Expert Seminar

22-24 November 2016, Brussels

Individual Paper: “From camp to campus: the role of the youth sector in the access of refugee children to Greek schools”

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Abstract

In October 2015, the Joint Council on Youth adopted a [Statement on the refugee crisis in Europe](#), in which 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, as a result of provisions made in the framework of Greece’s agreement with the EU, refugee students entered Greek schools. The newcomers’ presence caused reactions from parents and the clergy, who saw in these arrivals an alleged danger to public health and national cohesion. In some cases, refugee children were even prevented from entering schools. Greek NGOs working at grass-roots level have been playing a vital role in lifting stereotypes and together with educational practitioners they have been safeguarding the access of refugees into Greek schools. The present paper provides good practices from the youth sector, based on research conducted in Thessaloniki, where NGOs have been collaborating with researchers, as well as educational practitioners in order to facilitate refugees’ access to education. Non-formal learning tools and techniques are being implemented alongside the formal curriculum in order to emotionally prepare locals and refugees for their co-existence and to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding.

On a second level, the paper will comment on a void which exists in the educational system with regard 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 \(2014\) on Migrant children: what rights at 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 (Council of Europe 2016; Drosopulos 2016). Furthermore, instances of discrimination and potential conflict with the local community add to the emotional trauma inflicted by war, loss and separation (Bello 2016). 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 success stories from the youth sector in Greece and reflect on possible solutions to existing challenges.

Key words: youth work, youth sector, refugee children, education.

Background

The refugee crisis has caused the second largest displacement of people since the Second World War (UNHCR 2014, 2015). The people affected bear the trauma of war and loss, aggravated by the scepticism and suspicion expressed by Europeans, a large number of whom have interpreted this sudden influx of people as an “invasion” (Bello 2016).

For most refugees, Greece was meant to be a transit country on the way to more prosperous western European countries. The EU-Turkey agreement, which Greece also signed and which blocked refugees’ exit to Europe, was met with rage and despair by most 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.

On the other hand, Greek society was also divided about these developments. Part of the Greek population expressed sincere solidarity towards the refugee drama, while others saw this newly formed situation as another plague in a suffering country.

According to the EU-Turkey agreement (2016), Greece would have to take a series of measures to support and integrate refugees. In this framework, in February 2016, 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 on Greek soil. Faced with an unprecedented situation, the Greek Government appeared unprepared and it was soon made clear that new remedies

would have to be employed in a schooling system which for years has been lacking the true essence of intercultural education (Mousiadou 2014). The youth sector played a vital role in providing answers on how to integrate refugees and also prepare the local community. The present study follows the latest developments in the schooling system of Greece, commenting on good practices, but also aspects that need to be improved.

The 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 was one of the member states which had reduced its 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 students into Greek schools. This initiative was followed by a number of measures which aimed to facilitate the access of refugees not only to education, but also to 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 has depended on initiatives launched by local authorities, the youth sector, local NGOs and, of course, citizens.

Following the evacuation of the camps in Idomeni, refugees were moved to Thessaloniki. Special settlements were set up in areas near and inside the city, where refugees would have access to decent living conditions. In the following months, local authorities worked together with NGOs and the UNHCR in order to renovate unused buildings and create affordable apartments for families. Except for facilitating refugees' access to basic human needs, the youth sector has played a vital role in providing education. Teachers appointed by the government were first sent to refugee camps, where the lesson was conducted in tents and yards. Their work was complemented by interactive activities organised by local NGOs, which visited the

camps regularly. Facilitators used a number of non-formal learning techniques to reach to youngsters, who often spoke nothing but Arabic and who had missed months of education as a result of the war (Trafford 2016).

The joint work of teachers and trainers had multiple objectives: to prepare students 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 youngsters and alleviate the trauma inflicted by loss, violence and separation.

With the official beginning of the school year, it was the youth sector again that collaborated with local authorities and headmasters in order to bring refugees to school. The Greek state had made provisions, according to which refugee students 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 student would attend would depend on their area of residence.

The research

This paper is based on research which was conducted between July and November 2016 and followed the refugee students' passing from camps to school. The focus of the research was the city of Thessaloniki, but recent international experience with refugees in the Balkans and western Europe was also employed in order to evaluate the outcomes. The research was conducted in both conventional and intercultural* schools, as well as at refugee camps, welcome centres, municipal institutions and NGOs.

The schools selected for the research are in areas of Thessaloniki which have traditionally been multicultural and thus more tolerant to people from different ethnic backgrounds. Thanks to the low cost of renting, nowadays these neighbourhoods host a large number of refugee families from Syria and other countries affected by the war. They are 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 aimed at supporting youth, education, health and sports.

The methodology of the research was based on qualitative tools, 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 councillors);
- silent observation in the classroom and at school facilities;
- active participation in the classroom as a guest tutor;

- interaction with young refugees and their families; and
- following relevant socio-political developments in the local and international media.

Main outcomes of the research

Overcoming ignorance and prejudice; challenges in accessing education

The inclusion of refugees in the Greek educational system – and consequently in local society – has been a challenge for a number of reasons. First, the official integration process launched by the state has been unsystematic and disorganised; bureaucracy and lack of relative experience have taken their toll. The internal reconstruction of the ruling party in November 2016 and the consequent redistribution 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, Kostas Gavroglou.

Reciprocal suspicion or ignorance among locals and refugees is the biggest obstacle blocking access to education. Interviews with both teachers and youth 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. Religious and cultural constraints also block the road to education for a few young people, especially girls in adolescence, who are encouraged to focus on their future role as wives and mothers instead of studying. With regard to young men, it is an economic responsibility towards the family, as well as their traditional role as “family guardians” or “providers” that forces them to pursue a job and consequently drop out of school. Studies indicate, however, that refugees are usually offered underpaid and unstable jobs in marginal sectors (Sorgoni, in Koizumi and Hoffstaedter 2015: 130). The lack of specific skills and qualifications required by the labour market is also the factor that later condemns them to low-skilled, low-quality jobs.

Representatives of the youth sector approaching refugees face the challenge of convincing the sceptical ones of the value of education and its long-term fruits. Given that a young person’s access to education is usually family-driven, youth workers employ a number of techniques, varying from inviting the whole family to attend training courses and consulting sessions in the NGO, to reminding legal guardians of the legal implications involved in blocking a young person’s school attendance. The youth sector has contributed greatly in the lifting of fears and stereotypes that would keep refugee children away from schools. Youth workers are the ones to reach out to refugee families and invite them to attend meetings, intercultural workshops and language classes, first at the youth centre and then at school. The research has shown that, in the main, refugee families are positive about their children participating in educational activities and in eventually entering schools. Even for those who are not interested in living permanently in Greece, school attendance is encouraged as a tool to keep youngsters away from ghettos and for making them more social and extrovert.

In relation to the reactions from the local community, the arrival of refugee students in Greek schools has not always been a peaceful process. At the beginning of the school year, there had been cases where locals literally blocked refugees' entry to school premises, or boycotted the process by refusing to send their own children to class. Some of them claimed that refugees are potential carriers of transmittable diseases, despite the fact that the Greek Ministry of Education had officially announced that health measures had been taken (Δραγασάκης 2016), while others spoke of refugees as a disguised menace to the Greek Orthodox religion and Christian ideals.

Refugee students' performance and integration at school

Nowadays in Greece, educational practitioners are experimenting with something which has traditionally been considered a taboo in the Greek schooling system: they are concretely collaborating with representatives of the non-formal education sector. Furthermore, they are consciously and systematically implementing non-formal learning techniques in the classroom.

With respect to refugee students' attendance, as a result of the factors mentioned above, the percentage of refugee students actually attending schools is much lower than the initial estimates, although more people are expected to enter education gradually. This phenomenon is obviously not limited to the city of Thessaloniki.

Concerning performance, the impression gained by silent observation in classrooms is that refugee students exhibit zeal in learning and becoming part of the community. This fact has also been reflected in interviews conducted with teachers. Furthermore, certain students' level of English, as well as their general knowledge, skills or attitudes suggest that they are coming from a high-level schooling system; had it not been for the war, these young people may possibly have been pursuing a bright academic future instead of struggling for survival.

Pupils coming from environments that do not see any gains in education are those exhibiting low performance and disengagement. Linguistic obstacles worsen the situation; there are students speaking nothing but Arabic who suddenly find themselves at the second or third grade of high school. We should mention that refugees join classes based on their age and not on their actual academic competence.

Teachers have played a vital role in refugee students' being accepted as equals by the rest of the class. Many practitioners interviewed mentioned that they have had experience from the non-formal sector and that they implemented learn-by-doing techniques promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding. Many of them had prepared the class before the arrival of the new student, either by talking about the war in Syria, or by introducing the class to the notions of peace, equality and tolerance. As many of them pointed out, the biggest challenge was to talk about war and loss, but without picturing refugees as helpless creatures, which need to be pitied or looked down upon. Practitioners also tried not to make the new students appear as something "exotic", as this would possibly result in their isolation. As a general comment on Greek education, it could be said that it was probably the absence of

these key points identified by teachers and youth workers that had caused previous educational reforms in Greece to fail or eventually to die out.

A key message that could be conveyed from the research is that the management of the refugee crisis calls for the collaboration of all sectors active in the youth field. 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.

What happens after officially becoming an adult?

The moment a young person turns 18, their legal status automatically changes and they are officially recognised as “adults”, meaning that they are viewed by the state as more autonomous individuals and they are therefore deprived of many of the privileges and protection measures that they enjoyed as “children”.

A void has been located in the situation of young refugees aged between 18 and 24 (Council of Europe 2016). At an international level, the image is blurred concerning the future of young people who are in the transition to adulthood or who were forced to interrupt their studies due to the war. At the moment, there is no common policy at a European level regarding young refugees’ access to higher education in the host country, recognition of academic credits or equivalence of university titles granted in their country of origin. The fight with bureaucracy is time-consuming, complicated and discouraging, especially when the young person does not have active guidance and assistance or is facing linguistic barriers. Discrimination and fear of rejection may also prevent a young person from pursuing a better future. Let us remember that the trauma of loss in combination with the emotional swings of adolescence can affect a person’s idiosyncrasy and distort the way they view themselves as new members in a community.

Concerning young refugees aged 18-24 living in Thessaloniki, the data of local NGOs (Arsis, USB 2016) show that for young refugees on the edge of adulthood, employment is a priority over higher education. Young people seek 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.

This void in policy is a factor that European countries should explore and try to tackle, given that young people between 18 and 24 constitute a productive force which could actively contribute to a country’s economy. Research is also needed in order to identify these young people’s needs and strengths and plan a policy accordingly.

Note:

**Intercultural schools*: Intercultural schools bear the status of normal schools in Greece with regard to recognition, curriculum and equivalence. They have, however, a different philosophy regarding teaching methodology and tools employed: intercultural schools are established in multicultural neighbourhoods, characterised by social and cultural pluralism. Their aim is to ensure that students coming from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds will have equal access to education and will be fully integrated into Greek society. For this purpose, there are “welcoming” classes aimed at introducing students from different backgrounds to the Greek language and culture. There are “preparatory” and “auxiliary” classes for students facing linguistic barriers or other challenges affecting their performance at school, such as domestic violence, absence of a solid family background, addicted parents etc. Teachers have a more “intercultural” perspective in teaching and usually have a good or basic command of the languages spoken by students; many of them have experience from schools abroad or belong to a cultural or linguistic minority. At intercultural schools, refugee or migrant students co-exist with local students and learn to live and work together; this fact has a positive effect on the local community and prevents the phenomena of ghettoisation, delinquency and xenophobia.

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