

## Teachers' opinions on handling refugee education in relation to the recognition of their identity<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*As a result of the massive arrival of refugees in Greece that has taken place since 2015, both the Greek educational system and its educators have had to face various challenges, taking into account the fact that one third of refugees are school age children. This study, as an attempt to discover whether and to what extent children's identity is taken into account, focuses on ideas and attitudes as they were expressed by teachers of refugee students in their endeavour to teach the latter and include them in a new and yet unknown schooling system.*

### Keywords

refugee students, reception facilities for refugee education, identity, educators, qualitative research, mother tongue, culture

### Introduction

During the last three years there have been a considerable number of refugees who came to Greece in order to move and resort to one of the northern European countries, but thousands of them, after the closure of the borders, ended up trapped in the Reception Accommodation Centers of Greece. As a large percentage of them were actually children, there needed to be some provision made for their school attendance. This resulted in the introduction of Reception Facilities for Refugee Education, which operated in school buildings during

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<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Tsioumis, K., & Chiona, S. (2020). Teachers' opinions on handling refugee education in relation to the recognition of their identity. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 309 - 321). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

afternoon hours and included subjects such as Greek and English Language, Math, Physical Education, Information Technology and Art. Substitute teachers who applied for these Facilities were appointed to teach refugee students both in Primary and Secondary Schools.

### **A reality: Refugee children in Greece**

The refugee children who arrived in Greece created a new social and educational reality, as they had come from warring countries and had been through several hardships on their way. Apart from the trauma, a lot of them had stopped attending school some years ago due to the war and political instability. On the other hand, the Greek substitute teachers who had been appointed to the Reception Facilities had no prior experience on similar situations or special training, especially in the beginning. Thus, they had to improvise and use all resources available to them in order to teach their new students in a method suitable to them and their needs. That is why this research aimed at exploring the teacher's opinion on ways in which they could manage their teaching along with their students' identity. Towards this aim a group of 25 teachers were interviewed about the ways they perceive the students' culture, their needs and desires as well as the opinions they hold on the use of the students' linguistic as well as cultural background.

### **Theoretical background**

According to the relevant bibliography, there are three types of capital that any human can have: a) economic, which is concretized with money b) social capital, which is expressed as a complex of social relations and c) cultural capital, the total of the mental, spiritual and moral elements such as the knowledge, attitudes and skills acquired from their immediate family and largely depends on the social class to which they belong (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997; Jenkins, 2014; Matthys, 2013). The accumulation of this particular cultural capital is conducted within the framework of the family and the society. It consists of habits, preferences, ways of communication, and "patterns" of thought that allow for various combinations.

In addition, the linguistic capital can obtain an image influenced by the social position of its speakers, which sometimes serves as a criterion for the choice of specific languages as officially taught in public schools (Skourtou, 2011; Pantazis & Sakellariou, 2003). Consequently, it is frequently observed that, as the focus is

placed on the teaching of the predominant language, students' mother tongues are neglected and excluded from education despite their cultural and psychological significance, not to mention the right of every child to their mother tongue as an inextricable element of their identity (Mitakidou & Proveleggiou, 2014, Skourtou, 2011).

Another term connected with intercultural education is the one of identity, as is the one of diversity. In the case of students who come from different cultural backgrounds, their cultural, linguistic and religious identity plays an important role for their education. Identity ensures the continuity of people's existence in space and time, as well as the recognition of this continuity by others, yet culture and identity are not the same, as the latter answers the question of belonging (Hofstede, 2001, p. 10).

Diversity, on the other hand, answers to questions that deal with differences from the others, rather than similarities. As Tsafos (2008) points out, there even seems to be some degradation concealed in the definition of diversity, as it is related to what is dominant or superior. Therefore, any deviation from the average or dominant culture can be considered as diversity and may hinder integration into the majority into which the individual wants or is required to join in order to survive.

## **Identities of refugees**

Although most refugees who settled in Greece came from the Middle East, their origin as well as their national, linguistic and cultural identity differ. This paper is dealing with three of them: the Syrians, the Kurds and the Afghans.

First of all, the Syrian refugees are the ones who also sometimes define themselves as Arabs. Nydell recognizes that despite their diversity, the Arabs are characterized by homogeneity in terms of respect for tradition, central role of the family, social ethics, trust in fate or the values of faith, dignity and piety (2012). However, Syria, according to South & Jermyn, is the most heterogeneous of all the Arab countries, with a set of Phoenician, Babylonian, Assyrian but also Turkish and French elements, so there is not one specific set of values and beliefs (1995, pp. 53-54).

They speak Arabic, a language of the Semitic group. The official Arabic language, which is based on classical Arabic texts, such as the Koran, is not anybody's mother tongue (Izady, 1992, p. 185), since each Arab nation uses a different

dialect, with great differences in vocabulary and phonology (Albirini, 2016), to an extent where they function as different languages.

The Kurds are an ancient people who have lived nomadically in the mountains of Southwestern Asia for centuries (Gelletly, 2010). Today, they live in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria with a different political situation in each case and from these countries they arrive in Greece as refugees. According to Izady, the Kurdish society, as well as the Arab one, is heterogeneous in terms of the elements which form a national identity, such as religion, language, means of economic production or country of origin (1992, p. 184). This variety, though, does not prevent them from considering themselves bearers of the same identity. "Language and religion are, for many Kurds, key aspects of their identity, but not all Kurds follow the same religion, nor speak the same language "(van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 27).

Their language belongs to the Indo-European group and in particular the Indo-Iranian languages, has many similarities to Persian and consists of many dialects (Campbell & King, 2013). The two main dialects, sorani and kurmanji, differ as much as English and German, and it seems more appropriate to refer to them as different languages (Kreyenbroek, 1992, p. 55).

Last but not least, the Afghans have come from a country which has never been rich and most of its inhabitants are engaged in livestock, agriculture and trade. It is made up of many different ethnic groups; a quarter of which leads a nomadic way of life (Banting, 2003, p. 18) and their identity is determined by the values of collectivity, family and community, with equivalent priorities (Johnson & Leslie, 2013). Since the 1970s, it has been plagued by civil wars (Downing, 2008), faced the Soviet occupation (Barber, 2008), while since the 19th century, it had been suffering from the conflicts of Anglo-Egyptian wars (Ewans, 2001). The efforts which have been made towards the modernization and secularization of Afghanistan have been objected by conservative religious circles of the country, who had an important social and political role (Ewans, 2001, σ. 92-95· Gritzner, 2007, σ. 39), not to mention the role played by the Taliban movement, who believed in an extreme strict interpretation of the teaching of the Quran, and imposed the Islamic law in a disastrous way banning sports, music, television and cinema, and excluding women from education, work, free movement and medical care, (Barber, 2008). However, after the end of the Taliban rule, women regained most their rights, such as those of work and education (Banting, 2003, p. 23).

As regards schools, the language taught is Dari, a Persian language and it is the one used in the media and the administration, serving as a *lingua franca*

(Thompson, 2013). Many words are similar to those in Arabic and the alphabet used is also the Arabic, with the addition of four additional letters to represent additional sounds (Campbell & King, 2013). After all, with the establishment of Islam, the Arabic alphabet, replaced all previous writing systems (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p. 52).

## **Muslim religion**

In the case of the Middle East both culture and social organization are determined in great extent by Islam, one of the world's three monotheistic religions. Islam is the submission to the one and only God that offers peace and security to the faithful (Eliade & Couliano, 2016, σ. 171; Πήγας, 2016, σ. 12). The most important text upon which the Muslim religion is based is the Qur'an, written in Arabic, hence, for Holt, Arabic is the cultural medium of the religion, since it delivers its message (1996, p. 12).

## **Teachers' opinions on teaching refugees: Views and experiences**

### **Handling students' identity**

As soon as teachers were appointed to a Reception Facility for Refugee Education, they had to start getting acquainted with their new students, identifying their needs and planning their teaching accordingly. As expected, teachers tried both to approach their students as well as observe their behavior and habits. According to their statements, they realized that pupils lacked school discipline (40% of the answers), as they expected a stricter educational system with teacher-centered teaching methods (24%), where corporal punishment would be the norm (40%). Regarding the most noticeable cultural elements, a lot of teachers largely observed persistence on behalf of the students on traditional gender roles (44%).

### **Religious identity**

However, the issue that all teachers were mostly interested on or even worried about was the students' religious identity. Although the refugees that came to Greece belonged to different religious groups, the majority of them were Muslims, as were the interviewees' students. Their teachers observed the expressions of their religious identity, which they consider to be of high importance: *“their culture has mainly got to do with religion”, “that is where*

everything begins and ends... everything derives from the religious feeling”, paying attention to various aspects of it. First of all, the majority of the teachers realised how important their students considered the procedure of keeping the Ramadan fasting (56%): “I won’t eat an ice cream, because I have the Ramadan”, “they neither drink water nor eat”. Some also report that such fasting habits make students tired and reluctant “they never went out during the break, so as not to get tired, neither to play nor to drink water”, “fasting is rather barbaric, as a result they can’t have very many lessons, they can’t attend sports, they come, at many times reluctantly”, “they are exhausted or a bit more nervous, for example, one little girl kept saying “I am hungry, I am hungry”. Of course, we respect their religion and we cannot give them anything”. Secondly, in the teachers’ opinion, Muslim faith was expressed in a strong way (36%): “Many students brought a mat and when it was time, they went and prayed”, “drew his family in a mosque”, “she read the Koran during the break, she brought it with her... I ask them about their religion, they do not refuse to talk about it, although they know I am Christian”, “one girl, at some point, took off her scarf, laid it down and prayed”. Despite this intense expression of faith, there is also a critical view towards it:

*They are very religious but they look at it from the point of view that a normal person would see it, anyway, someone who has a normal relationship with God and religion. They blame the vulnerabilities of their religion... which led them to this situation.*

Attire and dress codes have been considered another form of religious expression (20%) “the girls in High School wear the scarf (hijab)...even now in the summer, with long pants, long sleeves”. In other cases, though “we have students who have taken it off, they didn’t wear it at all, or they wore those woolen hats... in the end they renounced that, too”. Interestingly enough, a teacher pointed out: “We still have the image of the grandma with the scarf; we accept it much more easily here than abroad. Especially nowadays, let’s say, that there is islamophobia”.

A similar observation was the abstinence from pork (12%), proving the connection between religious faith and eating habits “the pig, wherever they saw it and the colour pink, in any book, they expressed ... their disapproval. This is an element of their culture”, “it is typical that every time they see us having a baguette with turkey, they start cursing, believing that it is pork in there”.

On the other hand, 16% of the teachers state that they barely noticed anything connected to religion: “at this age, I haven’t seen anything”; “I would not see any religious elements”. The relationship with the Christian religion also interested the teachers. A percentage of 8% noticed some disapproval of other religions and their symbols “they had an issue with crosses... “ma’am, no good, no good””, “to

hide the icon”, while an identical percentage focused on similarities with the Christians (8%) *“We talked about Christmas, they showed us that they decorate a tree”, “they certainly have a lot in common with us”*. Accordingly, 4% of the interviewees observed some interest in the Christian religion: *“they asked, I think about the icon.... we said we had the “Lady-Lent”, in the other class our colleague had put the Crucifix ... they would ask about them”*. However, as it will be analysed later, neither the comparison of the similarities and differences, nor the Muslim religion itself were widely used as a means of teaching.

### **Mother tongue and linguistic capital**

As mentioned previously, the students of the interviewees’ classes belonged to different ethnic groups and even if they went to the same school they could speak different languages. According to our research, the majority of the students spoke Arabic, a few more than half spoke Kurdish, mostly kurmanji and 40% spoke Farsi, languages which the teachers themselves did not know.

Nevertheless, it was significant to understand whether teachers supported the inclusion of the students’ mother tongue or mother tongues. Regarding the usefulness of the inclusion of the students’ mother tongues, the majority seems to believe in it, as 56% consider them to be *“very important”, “especially useful” “surely it would help”, “of course they can and of course they must be used”, “100%”,* as they say. These opinions were advocated by the interviewees’ arguments and suggestions: *“they like showing you things from their language or culture”, “there should be Arabic writing, so that they feel more comfortable”, “there could be a book... the words in English and in Arabic... with their cultural elements, so that I can get to know them”, “to be taught Arabic here, I don’t know how feasible this can be... but why not, of course I agree”, “if we can include this thing... we, as a Mediterranean people, do not differ that much”*.

The presence of interpreters is considered valuable (16%) for the sake of mutual understanding and the efficiency of the lesson: *“in this case we need translators”, “when we had the interpreters it was nice”, “they don’t speak Greek, they understand it, but they don’t speak”*. However, 12% find it extremely difficult *“how would it happen?”* or even unattainable to use it (4%): *“I do not know whether it would be feasible”* and another 12% fails to recognize its usefulness: *“I have too many reservations about this. It has been suggested; personally I would even say that I disagree”*. Some associate this integration with the process of interpretation *“because you want some help... to tell you some things in Syrian”*, either for the purpose of basic communication (8%), or even as a starting point for

the organization of appropriate activities. All in all, the teachers' opinion on whether integration of the culture or language in the lesson is useful seems to depend on the interest

that they themselves have shown, as typical responses show: *"Undoubtedly ... I am incredibly fascinated by the things I hear, from stories that children will tell, from the language itself both the Arabic and Kurdish", "I was very excited when I found how many words we have in common with their language"*.

In practice, though, teachers sometimes use it in order to effectively teach vocabulary (36%), *"we showed pictures ..." how do you say that in Kurdish? "... we asked them", "I will take the word from Arabic or Kurdish and I will use it again and again", "when I taught vocabulary ... I made them explain the words in their own language and they also wrote them on the board", " they saw the days in their own language and I think it was pleasant to them"*. A 12% uses the language in order to give instructions to the students: *"simple instructions... that is, I essentially use three languages, Greek, Arabic and English lots of times", "we greet them in their mother tongue"*. Therefore, the mother tongue is not used during the lesson for the educational process itself, as part of the learning activities, but rather as a means of interpretation or explanation. Others make use of the help of the students in order to deliver the desired message: *"some students who were good and older in age and spoke English... we used them as interpreters, which was good for the children themselves and to the others", "we got the older ones to translate"* or the aid of technology *"I'm not ashamed to say what I do, I use Google Translate in Arabic", "whatever we did was through the internet"*, while others let children use it outside the classroom *"when playing", "they speak Arabic and we don't mind"*, without connecting it to the lesson.

### **Cultural capital**

Apart from the linguistic one, another equally important issue under discussion was the extent of the use of the cultural capital of the students in class. During the school year at the end of which the interviews were taken, 40% of the teachers stated that the cultural capital of the students, even when recognized, was not used in class: *"No, because it was not required", "not really", "nothing comes to my mind now", "we could not really do much", "time did not allow", "we thought about it, but unfortunately, we got stuck and we couldn't"*, even though they admit that *"that would be very nice"*.



Some teachers, though, tried to use the refugee home culture taking inspiration from a variety of its elements, which they tried to incorporate in their lessons. The most popular choice was music or dancing (32%): *“I was trying to choose music of theirs”, “songs of theirs”, “what dances they might have”, “they have shown us, that is, some traditional dances which remind us our Greek ones”, “we found Syrian songs, how they are danced, like our own folk ones and they danced to them perfectly”, “they loved that, seeing versions of Arabic songs in Greek and vice versa”, “they present their favourite singer, who will be from their country”*. Others use ideas from traditional ethnic food (16%) *“We took many examples of their own dishes & recipes”, “their traditional dishes, because for example, they had dates, or humus and we tried to explain what ingredients it has”* and even share experiences with their students: *“they were celebrating something and they gave us and we ate with them and in their own way”*. The same percentage makes use of traditions and customs (16%) *“customs that we showed on YouTube”, “during the period of the Carnival, if they had something similar, we talked about it”, “one day, we made something with clay, I had one girl... who made her dowry in jewels”*. With the help of technology, 12% of the teachers managed to project movies and videos: *“a nice movie in Arabic”* or sights and photos (12%) *“sights or something of their own culture through photos”, “they told me exactly what to look for and we found photos... they showed me what important things are in Syria, museums, exhibits”*. Last, a small percentage of 4% used the Muslim tradition as a starting point: *“With the times of prayer, we were trying to learn the time... what time should they pray or in which month they have Ramadan to learn the months of the year”*, while an equal percentage of the interviewees chose an aspect of everyday life, that is shopping and consumption *“I tell them, for example, you are in the market and you shop”*. Comparing those percentages, one can see that although many teachers referred to the Muslim religion previously, only 4% uses it as a point of reference within the class: *“I wouldn’t want to insist on the part of religion. I don’t think it helps to insist on any religion, not just theirs”*.

Later on, it turns out that there were more than a few teachers who had planned or thought of activities to make the most of the cultural background of their students and when asked, they were able to refer to an example of an activity they had in mind for the future, even if they did not have the chance, the skills or the time needed to implement it, despite the 24% of the teachers who still had no such idea: *“to tell you the truth, no. No, I didn’t think of anything to do”, “No, no I can’t”*. Music and dancing are once more a source of inspiration for the 32% of the interviewees, who believes that this aspect of culture can easily be integrated in the school curriculum: *“some songs”, “some performances or it’s not difficult for*

us to learn some Arab dances”. 20% suggest a comparison between languages and cultures: “We can compare some elements in their language”, “to be able to find elements from both”, “to match elements of elements in their language to English and to Greek”, “a role play ... how Lilah talks to her dad, how Maria talks to her dad”, “to locate where we differ as cultures”. Fewer teachers refer to fairy tales (8%): “from their birthplace... we could adapt it, make it like a theatrical play”, the market (8%): “like a sketch... the market they have”, traditional recipes (4%): “to make something traditional of their, a recipe” or even history and politics (4%): “The part of their history is very fascinating, especially the Kurdish one... we could integrate it into the smaller classes, that is, like a game”.

All the ideas analysed above were quite creative but did not succeed “we have responsibility for not insisting”, “in the beginning, we were thinking of so many things, projects to run, which was difficult”. It is true that the teachers had to face a lot of difficulties such as lack of oral communication, student reluctance and disassociation from school or undisciplined and reckless behaviour from the students, as well as their trauma or psychological problems.

## **Discussion**

From the research which took place and the analysis that followed, there are key conclusions to be drawn. They reflect the attitudes regarding understanding and handling the cultural identity of refugee students, as they emerged from their answers to the questions of the interview. Although the teachers who were interviewed belonged to different schools, areas and specialties, they proved to have some opinions and attitudes in common, which are worth investigating. Undoubtedly, teachers try to define the cultural identity of their pupils observing their daily behavior, the way they work at school and their religious expression. For example, more than half of the teachers refer to the talk about Ramadan and its strict fasting, while fewer teachers refer to the expression Muslim faith or the attire that characterizes Muslims. All these elements enrich the image that teachers have formed for the identity of pupils, their attitudes and their beliefs.

All of the above findings set the targets for the teachers who teach refugee students and help them form their aims and objectives. Although the integration of the refugees’ linguistic and cultural capital is not a priority for the teachers, when asked about it, the majority states that they consider it useful and important. However, many of them are cautious, believing that such a procedure is difficult or even unfeasible and demand the presence of interpreters at school as a necessity.

As regards the use of mother tongue in practice, the need of interpretation appears again, so the language ends up serving this particular purpose, as the interviews depict. It is not an actual part of the material or the activities of the subjects, but a means of completing the teaching process. A smaller percentage, though, manages to use it with the aid of technology, which offers additional potential, or in a quite communicative manner, for instance for greetings or instructions, something that might contribute to the recognition of the identity of the refugee students.

Nevertheless, what is quite noteworthy is the effort made, or intended to be made by the teachers to integrate the culture of the refugee students in their lesson though a rather impressive 40% have not used it at all this cultural capital. More specifically, most use musical stimuli, songs and dances, first of all and then what follows are the habits, customs and local recipes, choices that teachers consider interesting and easy to use. As for their ideas for future exploitation of students' cultural capital, there are considerations for comparison of languages and cultures, theatrical plays and fairy tales, while, once more, one out of four teachers are still left without any ideas.

In conclusion, there could be a lot of ways to help teachers achieve the aim of inclusion, such as new, culturally and linguistically adapted, school books, logistical infrastructure, special guidance, language courses, presence of interpreters or cultural mediators and most importantly suitable training, which will deal with teaching foreign languages, intercultural education, trauma and resilience or culturally sensitive behaviour. In order to overcome difficulties and to support the education and inclusion of refugees efforts by both society and the state, but also by the teachers themselves are required, who will need to search for opportunities for professional development and training, but above all, for recognition and utilisation of the linguistic and cultural elements carried by the their students in the management of their classes, something rather demanding, requiring perseverance and creativity. Most teachers are ready to reflect and look for such opportunities that will emerge more easily through the relationships they develop with the children. In this light, the role of the teachers in empowering the refugee students' needs to be consistent with their personal theory in order to be able to both scientifically and practically support their actions and choices. In this way, they will be motivated and successful in managing the complex network of relationships and interactions that develop in the classroom and cope with the varied needs of their students.

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