

The refugee children's cultural capital and the Greek schools: a case study of a refugee family in the north-west of Greece¹

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Abstract

The Greek multicultural mosaic has been enriched recently, due to the influx of thousands of refugees from the Asian countries. Schools are now educating more diverse kids of different origins and cultures and teachers are applying an array of practices in order to ensure effective results in these settings. The present paper demonstrates a case study of a refugee family with a view to investigating their past social profile, its impact on the Greek grounds as regards their attitude towards school as a value and the inclusion of the refugee children in the Greek educational system. We are aiming at presenting the results of three semi structured interviews: with the refugee family- mother and two sons-, with an English language teacher and a Greek language teacher, who are currently teaching the younger of the two sons. The first interview, based on the cultural capital theory expressed by Bourdieu, provides valuable information and contributes to the interpretation of the students' performance and interaction on the school grounds, as this is elaborated by the two teachers' interviews, who are making an effort to interculturally approach the issue and implement feasible methods to enhance the children's inclusion in the new environment.

Keywords

refugee children, Greek educational system, interculturalism, multiculturalism

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Introduction

The Greek society, following the universal changes as regards the population composition, has been turned into a multicultural one. A Syrian boy, who stood out from the other refugee and migrant children as soon as he enrolled in the Greek educational system in the Intercultural school in a provisional school in Greece, was the one who caught our attention and triggered our study. Greece has been receiving immigrants for many decades now. For the last two years, 2016-2017, more than a million refugees and immigrants from the Asian countries have crossed the Greek borders (ΥΨΠΤΕ, 2017). The Greek government, respecting the Convention for Children's rights (UNICEF, 1989), applied article 17 to ensure the refugee's and immigrants' children's right to education, promoting it as universal while assuring equivalent access to it. With a view to secure equal rights to education and avoid inequalities or exclusions, the Greek state, following the European Council Regulations (Project No7/1986) on Intercultural education, set up Intercultural schools (N. 1566/ 1985) and in order to put emphasis on intercultural education (given the present political, social and educational conditions), introduced a new law in 2016 (N.4415/2016- Άρθρο 20) and founded infrastructures for the education of refugee children (N.4415/2016- Άρθρο 38).

The boy was first included in the educational system in autumn 2017 being more fluent in English than in Greek. As a result, communication with his teachers and especially with the English teacher was much easier in comparison with the rest of the refugee children, who were not able to respond successfully neither in English nor in Greek. The decision to carry out the present study was made during a scheduled teachers' meeting. While we were discussing the children's performance, the teachers, who taught him English and Greek, emphasized his willingness to participate in school life and gain both knowledge and experiences.

The purpose of this article is to present the results of our qualitative study based on the hypothesis that it was the quality of the family's capital that determined his attitude and performance at school. The study is based on the concepts of *economic*, *social* and *cultural capital* put forward by Bourdieu (1977; 1986). According to this theory, what children inherit from their families is what determines their attitude towards life and unavoidably their school performance.

To be more specific, the capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which refers to the money or property a member of a society can make under certain circumstances, as *social capital*, which describes one's network of stable social relationships and creates possible opportunities of social elevation, and finally as *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1973 in Eleftheriadou, Sevi, Vavitsas, Nikolaou & Thanos, 2015).

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: the *incorporated*, *embodied form* or *habitus*, referring to people's permanent and continuous dispositions, the *objectified form*, related to cultural transmissible elements, such as paintings or books which can be obtained, depending on the subject's financial situation, and

the *institutionalized form*, which is conferred in the educational institutions and is legalized through the certificates, but cannot be inherited or transferred in any way (Bourdieu, 1973, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996 in Eleftheriadou, et al., 2015).

In addition, cultural capital is reflected through language and free culture. Free culture, which includes knowledge of painting, qualitative music, love for reading, the arts and the theatre, stems from one's educational- cultural capital, enriched by the years of studying and their social origin (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996 in Eleftheriadou, et al., 2015).

Finally, as regards the social capital, with the contribution of which social relationships are passed on from one generation to the next, it is gradually transformed into economic capital, to justify the claim that even the value of school certificates depends on the person's economic and social position (Bourdieu, 2003 in Eleftheriadou, et al., 2015).

In order to elaborate and present the findings of our study as accurately as possible, we initially conducted a semi-structured interview with the boy's mother so as to investigate the roots, the quality and the guises of the family's capital in their country of origin, Syria, and its reflection on the boy's social and school performance.

Additionally, we interviewed his two teachers who were basically involved in the educational procedure, the Greek and the English one. They portrayed the boy in terms of performance and reactions to educational stimuli and we, given the flexibility of the semi structured interview, attempted to relate the mother's answers to the boy's presence and action at school.

The findings of the interviews, after having been elaborated, are interpreted and presented in four distinct groups, based on the theoretical approach the research was designed.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is, initially, to detect and present the quality of the cultural capital that a refugee family who lives in Ioannina (a regional city in northwest Greece) have and the extent to which the present living conditions can contribute to its sustainment. Additionally, we aim to investigate how their cultural capital influences their perception and attitude towards Greek school as a value and whether the possible parents' expectations for their offspring future are related to it.

More precisely, we designed our plan of action in accordance with our theoretical framework (Creswell, 2003), with a view to being allowed to answer the following research questions:

- Which are the characteristics that constitute the quality of the refugee family cultural capital?

- How easy is it for the family to support and preserve their capital so that their children can be instilled with it?
- How does their capital influence the family' attitudes, social interactions, choices or even their expectations for their kids' future in the new social conditions they are asked to adopt themselves?

The qualitative research method enabled us to examine and understand the aspects of this particular case in depth (Mason, 2002). In particular, we selected the case study approach as through it, according to Yin (2003:15), a contemporary phenomenon can be investigated in real circumstances. To realise our research, we relied on semi-structured interviews as the means of collecting data, since this type of interview allows the interviewer to allow themes to emerge and address the questions in such an order that they adequately serve the purpose of the research and ensure the flow of the interview (Robson, 1993).

The study was carried out in the winter 2017. The three interviewees were informed about the purpose of the interview and were reassured about anonymity and confidentiality. Our questionnaire was composed of four parts, strictly related to the framework of its design, so as to provide data for analysis after the completion of the interview procedure.

Due to the fact that the first interviewee, the mother of the boy, spoke only her mother tongue fluently and was not able to communicate effectively either in Greek or in English, we were helped by an interpreter, who was already known to the family and willingly participated in the study. He translated the questions and the responses given by the mother and his presence made the woman feel more comfortable and secure. We conducted the first interview in the mother's house, while the two interviews with the teachers were recorded in the Intercultural school, where they are employed.

Findings

In the first part of the interview we collected data regarding the demographic characteristics of the family. We addressed the mother questions related to their country of origin, the parents' and children's age, their jobs in their country and the countries of reception as well as the place of their temporary or possibly permanent residence.

According to the mother's answers, the nuclear family consists of four members. They were all born in Syria but were made to abandon their land due to the war: *"We had to make a tough decision to abandon our country and our life in Syria to save ourselves ... we had a hard time... now we are safe"*. The father aged 36 used to do two jobs. He was an airline company employee and a cook at a restaurant. Mother, aged 28, was a housewife. She gave birth to two sons aged 13 and 15 respectively. *"Unfortunately, we don't live together now..."* said the interviewee. *"My husband left for Germany, where he works at a restaurant and I had to stay in Greece ... with my two sons ... I'm looking forward to living a quiet life as a family"*

again ... the authorities told us that we are going to Germany soon". The two teachers who were interviewed later also mentioned the younger son's eagerness to move to Germany, meet his father and live in a reunited family: "The boy seems to admire his dad. He talks about him daily and says that life in Germany can be good for them" said the Greek teacher while the English one added: "His father promised him that they will meet soon and will start a new life, since there are lots of choices for him there".

In the second part of the interview we addressed questions relevant to the family's economic capital. We asked about the parents' status, their income in their country and finally their financial situation now.

The interviewee directly made the comparison between their past life and the present reality: *"Back then we were quite well off... members of the middle class, as said. We had everything we needed. We lived in a house; we also had a small house in our village. We had enough money and we could help our kids. My husband, I've told you, did two jobs. We could afford to pay the fees to send our kids to a private school and offer other activities to them, such as sports. We also had a car and we had bought a computer just before the war started ... Now we can hardly make a living. I have to be here with my two kids. My sons are given the help they need to learn and I'm thankful. Their father works in Germany and is struggling to make us a family again".*

The son, his teachers said, has made reference to his experience in the private school comparing it with the Intercultural school he is studying now: *" This school is better ... the classrooms, the playground, the teachers ... everybody is more polite and happy. My teachers were always angry and strict".* The Greek teacher told us that when he finishes school, he does his homework and then has extra English lessons at the community centre or does sports, at which he is performing well.

To investigate the family's institutionalized capital in the third part of the interview we asked the mother to talk about the parents' educational background: *"Did you or your husband complete the compulsory education in Syria? Have you graduated college or university?"* The answer she gave was negative for her, but positive for her husband: *" My husband was educated, he was good and went to college. He speaks English and had two jobs. I didn't. I cannot even speak English. Now that we are here, the interpreter or my kids help me communicate ... "* The fact that the father speaks a foreign language, in this case English, is the motive for the son to learn it and apply it as a medium to learn Greek, communicate successfully and make progress. *"When he first came to school he was able to interact in English and made his first steps into learning Greek through translating words"* said the Greek teacher. *"The very first time he was found in the English classroom he asked me to speak only in English and avoid the use of his classmates' mother tongue, Greek. It was not a suggestion that would help him participate more. After all, he could take part and contribute to the lesson. He explained to me that when he first came to Greece he didn't want to learn English,*

but after a talk with his father and the volunteers on the campus he stayed, he realized how much it would help him to communicate and survive not to mention the fact that he would become socially accepted more easily. He insisted on me speaking only English as he thought that exposing the students to the foreign language all the time would be beneficial for them and they would speak the target language more quickly” added the English teacher.

What is more, with a view to recording the quality of the family’s objectified capital and their cultural goods, activities and interests, we addressed the first interviewee the question: *“Did you have any works of art, a bookcase or even musical instruments back at home in Syria?”*. The mother answered: *“We didn’t have paintings or musical instruments, though we listened to both traditional and modern music. Of course we had a bookcase, we had books. My husband always tells my kids to read ... now they read at school or at the community centre”*. Following the first question in this part of the interview, we asked her to provide more concrete information regarding the variety of books they had and the persons who used to read them: *“Mostly historic and literature. I didn’t read ... my husband was fond of reading...”*. So as to collect more data regarding their cultural capital we added questions about their interests including visits to museums, going to the theatre as well as their topics of discussion. The mother responded: *“Late at night we would sit altogether and talk about everyday issues and several important topics such as education, unemployment or families ... lots of things. When we had time we visited new places. My husband said it is useful for the kids, they become open minded. We rarely had the chance to be entertained as you frequently do here ... we would like it, though”*.

Moreover, we investigated the parents’ attitude towards school, their sons’ participation in school life and the parents’ involvement in it. The mother said: *“My husband helped the kids when they were at school, asked about their progress and now tells them to learn both Greek and English... he has found a Greek school for them in Germany ... without school and knowledge kids cannot live well ... and be good people”*

The influence the family’s cultural objectified capital has had on the son is verified by his teachers who said: *“He always borrows books from the school library and though he doesn’t understand everything he insists on reading them, he knows he can gain knowledge. Also, I cannot forget his questions in the museum of traditional art we visited, he was so impressed and eager to learn “and” I remember the day we were talking about countries and cultures. I asked him to tell us about his country. He was so proud! He couldn’t stop describing his place and his people. He had so vivid memories. He could compare the lives in the two countries ... it was a really intercultural lesson ... he knew that when we talk about some sensitive issues such as history or religion we have to be careful with words. When a day is special for him he comes to class and tells everybody. He catches our attention and we start long discussions exploring his world and issues that arise. He told us that his father is broad minded and has always urged him to travel. After asking me to which*

countries I've been he politely told me to bring into class books or postcards and souvenirs and talk about my experiences there".

The fourth and last part of our interview aimed at relating the family's cultural capital to their social capital.

Describing their life in Syria, the mother of the family said: "We would always invite relatives or friends. We celebrated our boys' birthdays and of course all holidays. This is what we are trying to do now. Keep our culture and tradition alive. However, our social life now isn't as it used to be. We meet at the community centre daily but we cannot develop relationships with the natives. I'm afraid we are not welcomed".

Contrary to his mother disappointment, the son does not seem to be so dissatisfied, as his Greek teacher told us: "The boy knows that there are hurdles to overcome but he makes efforts to get close to native people. At school he takes part in team sports and does lots of activities during our projects. He says that people need time to embrace the refugees, but his self confidence derives from his coach's faith in him and the fact that his father is always there for him. So far, he has made great achievements".

Conclusions

The completion of the interview procedure and the elaboration of the findings (as these have been presented above) have led to conclusions answering the research questions our study was designed on.

The features that compile the quality of the family's cultural capital are quite distinct and allow us to conclude that the initial hypothesis of our study is verified, since it is the enriched quality of their capital that has affected the son's performance and attitude at school. To be specific, the father, who, according to the answers, is the leader of the family, graduated from college and speaks English, a qualification that helped him have two good jobs in Syria. He is deliberately offering motives to his children and asks them to be active and learn useful academic and social skills.

In addition, a bookcase in the house was part of their objectified capital, which, in relation to the activities the father motivated the other members to do, seemed of quite high quality. The family did various cultural activities, such as listen to traditional or modern music, pay visits to places of interest with a view to gaining experiences and they also discussed issues that the global community has to deal with.

The economic capital of the family classified them in the middle class of their country, as they had a house, a small cottage in their village, a car and they had bought a computer before being forced to leave their place.

What is more, their social activity and interactions, which constitute their social capital, include gatherings with and invitations by people who belong not only to

family and friends but also to the school environment. The kids, as pupils, took part in school life and parents applied the practice of helping them with the school subjects and being informed about their sons' progress.

Finally, further comparative study of the answers provided by the three interviewees leads us to the finding that while the mother finds it difficult to preserve the cultural capital they possessed in their country, since the circumstances are not conducive, the father is trying hard to preserve it and the son seems to have been instilled with it. Both parents acknowledge the value of school, urge their offspring to devote their time to learning and realise how important the acquisition of knowledge and social skills is to live a good and decent life.

Given the fact that this original study focuses on a single family, its conclusions do not allow any generalization. However, its findings could illuminate some aspects of the refugee families' action and instigate further research in the fields of sociology and pedagogy, to detect and demonstrate all the special cultural features that refugee or immigrant people have.

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