

Refugees and Citizenship Education: Research and Proposal for Interventions at the University of Thessaloniki¹

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Abstract

The refugee issue has occupied Greek society since the autumn of 2015 due to the arrival of a significant number of refugees from Syria and other countries through Turkey. The reality has led Greece to the need to take certain measures for the care of the children and certain legislative initiatives for their education. At the same time, various research efforts were initiated at a postgraduate and an undergraduate level but also at the level of pedagogical interventions. The main findings revealed the difficulties faced by teachers due to the lack of English and Greek language spoken by refugee children, the inability to communicate, and the assumptions of newcomers regarding teaching methods. They also recorded their willingness to make changes to their program and practices in order to help these students.

Key Words

Refugee Education, Citizenship Education, Research on Refugees, Pedagogical Interventions

Greece has faced a serious refugee problem since 2016. People became sensitive and legislation had been adjusted. From January 2016 to November 2016, 171.7875 refugees arrived in Greece. 90% came from Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. 38% of them were children (Save the Children 2016). The fact that Central European countries made decisions to close the borders to limit refugee flows forced many of them to stay in the Greek area. The agreement signed in March of 2016 between the EU and Turkey has resulted in limiting the arrival of refugees to the Aegean islands. A large percentage of them remained in refugee camps created to relieve refugee structures on the islands and their short-term facilities, such as Edomeni.

Greece has served as a stopover for refugees on their way to Central Europe, with a significant number of them being found in Greece. These flows were limited

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following the signature of the European Union Turkey Agreement on the Refugee issue on 18 March 2016. At the time this agreement was signed, 60,000 refugees were left in Greece, and more than 50% were women and children. The Greek State machine was unprepared but willing to help. Reception Centers were set up and developments brought difficult situations such as Eidomeni.

Greek law 4414/2016 ensured the provision of psychosocial support and training to Asylum seekers as well as the smooth integration of those who would remain in Greece. This was also the case for unaccompanied children. Refugee Reception and Education Structures (RRES) were established and the organization, the operation and the program of education were determined as well as the staffing issues. In the Reception Classes, in which attempts were made to follow international experience, Greek, mathematics, English and Information Technology were taught in the afternoon, and there were corresponding provisions for kindergarten children through intercultural education.

Non-governmental organizations, ordinary citizens and teachers have been quick to help refugees. Related research and educational interest were created and the first quantitative and qualitative research on the issue emerged.

Research interest appeared on this issue. The majority of relevant surveys concerned teachers' views. The purpose of the first qualitative research was to investigate the experiences of workers and volunteers in the structures of non-formal education and creative employment in centers for refugees in Thessaloniki. This research effort involved 10 people, 9 women and one man who took part in semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this survey was (Gkikoglou, 2017):

- The exploration of the personal experience of employees and volunteers in non-formal education structures.
- Investigating the intercultural interaction of these people with children.
- The identification of elements that affect intercultural interaction such as language, culture, religion, traumatic experiences.
- Managing intercultural communication in the learning process.
- The identification of the main problems they face.
- The recording of the problems they believe will be created by integrating refugee children into education.
- To record the response suggestions.

Teachers developed a variety of teaching methods. One said that he applied a teacher-centered approach, but that he had experimented and reached the teacher-centered position because there was no dialogue. Others used a suitable book, but the children did not understand. Another teacher said that an interdisciplinary approach is being attempted but with changes according to the needs of the students. The children had learned through more traditional pedagogical methods and strict punishments.

Another teacher emphasized on the children's contact with the Greek culture, the school culture and the emotional status improvement. A schoolgirl said: "Now I feel school is like my home". Children learned many words from songs and the projector played an important role. As language material, material was used to teach Greek as a second language. The analysis showed the following categories:

The conditions

Teachers taught in areas with limited infrastructure, a feature that did not favor discipline, and because of bad conditions, there was a problem with heat and heat strokes. In most cases, there was no electricity, so there was no access to audiovisual material. The living conditions of children and families were really very difficult, and this also affected the trainers. There was still a serious issue with violence among children. The general view was that young children will be assimilated faster than the older ones because they will attend school at an early age and will come in contact with most children. Teachers believed that children had to go to school, whether they would stay or leave, and this class should be mixed to avoid creating troubles and to facilitate their inclusion. An important issue was the approach of the community because it would help children's progress more. Another observation made by those involved was that there was a need for staff stability because lasting changes were difficult for children. One of the main elements highlighted, finally, was the important role of the NGOs, which were experienced in managing similar situations and helped refugees and educators on practical issues, mainly with interpreters.

The subject

Teachers tried to follow the instructions of the Institute for Educational Policy. Greetings were given, basic vocabulary, colors, numbers, letters and the teaching of Greek as a foreign language.

Activities

Teachers tried to carry out creative or experiential activities using toys and balloons. Teachers adopted various methodologies and there was no analytical program. Priority was oral communication. Images, body language and words in the native language of the students (Arabic) were also used. Significant position was held by the projector and English. The lesson usually took an hour and the volunteers usually sat for two hours. All children carried out creative activities but only the adult male population attended language classes. The rooms had problems and difficulties. The volunteers set up things, so they decided beforehand what they would do to get the relevant material with them (Gkikoglou, 2017).

Material

Basic stationery, materials of artistic activities, recyclable materials, rope, scarves were used. There was also used material of the program Homogeneous education for the teaching of Greek as a second language. The basic goal was to relieve children. Emphasis was placed on socialization and social development. It was called for inclusion in the school environment and its implementation with different, alternative goals. Teachers made self-assessment and produced a daily report.

Education

The volunteers did not receive special training in the needs of refugees nor in intercultural education, which is why they stressed the necessity of training in language and culture, intercultural approach and communication. However, they showed particular interest as volunteers and tried their best. They were very pleased with the development of the children and wanted to help as they created a positive climate. The volunteers developed good relationships with adolescents and adults and were treated well. Generally, they functioned as a company. The volunteers, of course, were not sure whether they were as teachers or as people who offered play, joy and warmth. But they respected them. The volunteers had better interactions with the Afghans. Most children were clinging to their siblings. They generally had good relations with each other, but there was an aggression and they were talking badly to each other. Physical violence was common. Differences were more prevalent among adolescents than among children. There were also issues between Afghans and Syrians. Volunteers and educators considered the Afghans more organized and cooperative and the Syrians more confused and affected by the war trauma. All participants, regardless of their problems, their work effectively and instrumentally provided children with significant development. The main achievements of this process, apart from an elementary learning of the Greek language, were the development of a basic relationship with school and education, the development of team spirit and the creation of relationships of trust with teachers and people of the majority (Gkikoglou, 2017).

The aim of another qualitative study was to explore and record the views of teachers in relation to refugee education and to record their practices regarding the use of their mother tongue, the teaching methods they have used and to detect the prospects for school and family cooperation. The objectives of this research were:

- The recording of teachers' views in relation to the characteristics and needs / particularities of refugee children.
- The difficulties of teachers in relation to the integration of refugee children into the school
- The languages and tools they could use to educate children
- Training methods and approaches for the education of refugee children

- The possibilities of communication and collaboration between school and family
- Suggestions for better education (Mamasidou, 2017).

Twenty teachers, 14 women and 6 men, participated in semi-structured interviews. A qualitative content analysis was carried out, and the following data emerged:

Regarding the refugee-children profiles, the educators found that the children of the refugees did not differ from the other children and the main priority was to learn. Others argued that children as refugees had difficulty adjusting. Key issues were: the issue of language, different culture, culture and religion. Traumatic experiences played their own role and thus required additional support and assistance.

There was an obvious need for security and stability. On the other hand, education should follow the needs of these children. Refugee children were missing some basic things and the ignorance of language and the difficulty of communication affected them. However, these children tried to learn Greek.

The difficulties of teachers to deal with them were related to language and communication problems. Another issue was xenophobia, discrimination and racism. The children still had psychological problems (Mamasidou, 2017). The majority of (16/20) teachers considered the presence of refugee children as something positive, as they saw it as a form of enriching the educational process, acquiring new performances while still believing that coexistence helped refugee children come in contact with the Greek population, socialize with them and learn their language and habits. According to another version, children who are familiar with foreign people and cultures are helping them grow, but 3/20 were more troubled by arguing that the presence of refugees posed problems to native parents who reacted negatively and directed their children accordingly. Regarding where the children-refugees (11/20) should be enrolled, they felt that children should be enrolled in mainstream schools to avoid marginalization. Another teacher considered it important to properly prepare schools and teachers for to deal with this population. He himself pointed out that schools that lacked adequate infrastructure and staff were not trained. When the refugees were added, things became more difficult. Some teachers, however, disagreed and argued that the attendance of refugee children in special classes would produce results. 8 of them thought that language preparation (1-2 years) would work better to have a better base.

With regard to where they could apply for difficulties 15/20 were chosen the school counselor, 11/20 the school head, 9/20 would speak with colleagues 4/20 would seek information from a specialist body. Almost unanswered was the answer to whether collaboration with social workers and psychologists is

necessary. It was also suggested that local communities should also open up to organizations and institutions dealing with refugees.

With regard to language and communication tools, a great deal (big part) of 15/20 spoke about body language and pantomime. A bridge of communication was the English language where the children knew it. 13/20 suggested painting and using images and 4/20 playing games. 3/20 suggested the computer and 3/20 said they were trying to learn some words in their own language. Only one reported bilingual teaching.

For the use of the first language, 10 replied that they would use it in their everyday life of the school. They would have liked to know it to communicate. Teachers generally would like to bring it to the surface, so that other children can get to know it too. Regarding whether the language of refugee children should be taught at school, the majority of 15/20 responded positively that it is considered good for children to be taught their language because it is an element of their identity. They felt that they should be taught a second language too, as is the case in Germany and France. As far as teaching approaches are concerned, teachers have opted for collaborative methods that promote mutual co-operation and benefit from interactive and experiential ways which another method of playing. Two teachers talked about the use of a projects. Others emphasize the importance of the computer and the latter speaks about a personalized approach (Mamasidou, 2017).

Another qualitative research approach intended to capture the current situation in relation to the education of refugees in formal education. Eight educators took part in semi-structured interviews on the issue. The teachers who were selected, were working in Refugee Reception and Education Structures and Reception Courses in different regions of the country and these teachers had pupils who enrolled in school classes without attending reception classes, pupils who joined their home area schools without attending such classes. This choice was made because the previous survey revealed that the extent to which children met the needs of refugees is related to the experiences they offer (Hatam R & Every D, 2010). Also, research has shown that different regions may offer training with different degrees of effectiveness (Arnot & Pinson, 2005).

The aim of the survey was to capture the situation with regard to refugee education and to draw up data on the type of education provided to refugee children in relation to the approach and teaching material. A further purpose was the finding of support for refugee children in their integration and their stay in formal education structures. It was also intended to record the training and counseling support provided by the teachers. A last purpose was the presentation of what information actions were organized by the school units and finally the development of teachers' suggestions for better education of refugees.

At the beginning of the interviews, four teachers said that the interaction was limited to themselves and their students. One said, he was implementing a

pedagogical method and children were passive recipients. Another teacher said he had experimented with various teaching methods, but finished with frontal teaching because he was unable to communicate in English as well. The difficulties were many when he tried to use the special Hello book. He tried to apply communicative teachings as well as to devote enough time to communicative teachings. A basic effort was for children to enter the school climate. The teacher, however, pointed out that children, because of their previous educational experiences, were asking for frontal teaching. An educator stated that efforts were made to adopt a cross-thematic approach, but differences were eventually made based on the needs of children. When they also used differentiated teaching, it was applied at a different level because of the different children's background. The need for children to play and to engage with native pupils has been an important motivation for learning Greek. In addition to trying to develop school culture, teachers have tried to find common elements between cultures and to organize relevant discussions. They also tried to invest in children's psychology and improve it: As a student said: "... here I felt at home ..."

The material used also had its own significance. The audiovisual material and the projector were important tools that attracted the interest of the children and helped teachers work. There were reactions from the children themselves for the books used, because they were written for young children. An important chapter was undoubtedly the involvement of NGOs as a mediating factor between the school and the refugee family, with the crucial presence of interpreters and their assistance in practical issues. A very important issue was the lack of psychologists. Children seemed to be in need because they had gone through difficult times and hours of crises (Paschalis, 2017). The lack of supplies was evident, but, in addition to meals, NGOs contributed positively to this. Another teacher also pointed out the positive contribution of the municipalities.

In relation to the training process, there was a variety of views. Other teachers said they did not receive any training, others called the school advisor 1-2 times, but he did not have enough material to help. Three other teachers said they received inadequate training. As far as the issue of school-based communication for the integration of refugees is concerned, there were three kinds of updates: for morning-cycle parents, for students in the morning cycle and for parents of refugee pupils. In one school, brochures were distributed to parents, some of whom had already asked about the refugees, so that tensions were not created. Other teachers reported that the school administration had invited the parents of the morning circle and informed them about the matter. Otherwise, no informative action was taken, but the school was supportive of my culture and it did not become an issue. Some teachers considered the activities of the school very important because they minimized the reactions of the local community. When some parents complained about the large number of refugees and the possible drop in the level at their school, they received the answer that they would be distributed to other schools.

When other parents complained about the vaccine issue, they got the answer that the families verified that the children were vaccinated. What has been pointed out is that there has generally been insufficient parenting. In three schools, according to the respondents, information activities were carried out.

Some teachers dealt with the children's emotional world. In general, an effort was made to communicate with the parents of refugees, some of them were grateful, some others said they wanted their children to learn only English and some others protested that they did not learn Greek quickly. In one school, parents were invited to attend the lessons. They said they preferred to learn Greek than English and that their children should be in school in order to learn the language. Some parents also informed that children aged 10 and 11 did not go to school at all and asked teachers to be strict with them. In another case, despite the briefing, the parents did not seem interested in running the school and the children saw it as a game. Another teacher talked about very good communication with parents and excellent cooperation with them and a teacher pointed out that in his own case the parents did not want to communicate with the school because they were afraid to extend their stay in Greece.

Most teachers said that children should join the morning cycle while attending a reception class. Indeed, teachers were asked to be properly trained and if they were able to work in Refugee Reception Education Structures. It was argued that the classes should be fairly homogeneous because refugees differ according to their country of origin. It has been suggested that if refugee children do not join the morning cycle, they cannot enjoy the benefits of the Greek school. Only this way integration can be achieved. Otherwise, they are pushed into ghettoisation. One teacher talked about the need to teach refugee children about the Greek culture in order to join the Greek educational system. It is also important that teachers learn the culture of refugees. He also said that he sought practical information but did not find any. Generally, teachers who worked with refugees did not have enough knowledge. It is also important to note that refugee children did not understand why the other children did theatre, read poems and did crafts. It was very difficult for them to leave their habits, religion, etc. (Paschalis 2017).

Children at Christmas perceived diversity. In addition, the need to set up reception classes in refugee schools was highlighted, and it was pointed out that children tried but could not follow the rest. Three teachers called for the presence of an interpreter because their communication could not be carried out using pictures and children could not understand what they were telling them. Others again considered that psychologists need to be present and that their contribution would be essential.

An open curriculum was proposed for the management. The composition of the sections was proposed to be more homogeneous so that there would be no serious controversy. Problems were the lack of communication with parents because refugees were not accustomed to it and did not have a school culture. One teacher also offered differentiated pedagogy that gives the pupil

opportunities to develop. It is interesting to emphasize that most teachers saw the open curriculum as lacking a curriculum and decided what they would teach based on the needs they had seen. The open curriculum is flexible, learner-centered and leaves the educational space for teaching to adapt to the needs of children.

Where the directors undertook information activities, the integration of refugee children was not a problem. Teachers used frontal teaching because they were closer to the philosophy of families, but also because practically understanding was difficult because of the ignorance of Greek and often the English language. In general, the role of the school administration and the school climate have emerged as important factors. The NGOs and the municipalities gave an important role to teachers that would facilitate their work (Paschalis 2017).

Another undergraduate quantitative small-scale research centered on the opinions of kindergarten teachers on the question of presence, education and integration of refugee children. The sample of this little research was 100 kindergarten teachers who completed a questionnaire containing 23 questions.

With regard to the years of experience in multicultural settings, 40% had no experience, 12% had worked 2 years, 3% 1 year, 9% 3 years, 6% 4 or 5 years, 7% 6 years and around 12% over 8 years. Of these, 53% did not have any foreign children this year, 16% had 1-2 people, 7% had 3 people, and 1 to 2% of those who hosted 4 to 25 people. The same kind of kindergarten only 7% had refugee students and 93% did not. Of the respondents, 84% had foreign students in the past and only 16% did not. Of those who answered positively, 46.67% had children of economic migrants, 37.78% had children repatriated and only 3% were refugee children.

Of all kindergarten teachers, 98% said they had adopted strategies and practices of intercultural education and a 2% did not adopt it. Of those who adopted intercultural strategies, 35.05 used games and activities to share cultural experiences, 24.7 preferred group questions in the form of a debate, 23.7% used thematic circles to collect information about different cultures and 15.46% preferred to work with parents on relevant issues.

Regarding the question of whether thematic circles of worlds are involved, 78% answered positively and 22% negatively. With respect to the way they were implemented, those who responded positively stated that 42.05% used games, activities and books, 32.95% used movies, information, songs over the internet, 8.52% brought people from other cultures, and 4.55% visited museums and theaters.

In the question whether they have taken courses in intercultural education during their studies, 46% said they had received such training and 54% did not.

With regard to the schools in which refugee children should be included, 71% considered it important to place them in different classes for a period of time, 26% believed they had to join mainstream classes, 2% argued that they must always be

in different classes and 1% that maintained they should not join any schools. In relation to the learning of the Greek language, 98% considered it necessary and 2% did not. Among those who considered it necessary, 92% believed that learning Greek should start from their current class, 4% from the first grade of the next grade, 1% from the higher grade of the same grade, 15% from the last grade which they will attend. In the question whether they have taken courses in intercultural education during their studies, 46% said they had received such training and 54% did not.

The main findings of this research were that nursery teachers did not feel adequately prepared in relation to intercultural education and put more emphasis on the exasperation by children of refugees in the Greek language. They were generally receptive to the presence of refugees and prepared to make changes to their program in the context of intercultural philosophy to get closer to their students.

The last study presented was an action research intended to sensitize and to prepare young children in an urban multicultural kindergarten to accept refugee children and to help to adapt them. The prospective teacher used the citizenship education approach to detect whether it can sensitize children to this socially vulnerable group and prepare them for the arrival of refugees in school. She investigated the reality and the peculiarities of the class and proceeded, in concert with the class teacher, to the implementation of the activities.

Aims of the action research were:

- The cultivation of solidarity, social issues and acceptance of diversity through exploration of social issues.
- Taking actions and initiatives to solve problems.
- Arranging the concepts of democracy, equality, justice, human rights and freedom of speech dealing with crucial affairs.
- Growing moral and social consciousness.
- Cultivation of active empathy and mutual respect.
- Active participations in discussions and decision-making. Initiatives and enhancing collaboration for collective action.

The problem here was whether it was possible to sensitize young children to social problems, to make them search for solutions and to engage them in social action.

In the beginning, they visited the courtyard and recorded damages and other problems through photographs, they made comparisons with other schools using material from the internet and finally they presented their expectations through plans.

The young children created a poster with their requests for the improvement of the yard. They sent a letter to the Mayor requesting a better school. Children

worked on empathy, watched a film for refugees and then discussed it. They further created a poster gathering the needs of refugees.

-Donation of the gathered products to the refugees living in the borders of Edomeni by visiting the offices of a non-profit organization. The young children tried to take action to solve the problems of the strays in the neighborhood. They discussed the issue, shared roles and created a shelter to protect the strays.

- They asked for help and informed the neighbors.
- In the end, they made held a demonstration at the park.

This research has shown that kindergarten children can discuss and make decisions about issues that concern themselves and their lives. They can develop empathy and solidarity and take initiatives that help raise and manage problems (depending on the development stage they are at and regardless of the outcome they will have) democratically and through dialogue, preparing themselves to be the citizens tomorrow.

The series of qualitative surveys highlighted a number of issues that arose in the process of integration, education and employment of refugee children in school: language and communication problems, discipline and school issues with refugee parents, issues of management of the educational process, with or without a curriculum. Teachers in Greece have been sensitive on the refugee problem and talked about the ways in which they approached the education of children and despite their limited training, they approached the philosophy of intercultural education although there was a lack of management in this part. They faced difficulties in their work due to cultural differences but positive relationships had been built between educators and refugees. The main problem for them was how does one grapple with the parents' intention to go to another country and how does one address the prejudice of teachers and the social environment. Greek teachers and the Greek school have been open to the integration of refugees in education with visible problems but a lot of work has to be done.

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