

The process of schooling of the refugee children in the Greek schools

Case study: Open Cultural Center as a mediator and supporter. A study carried out in the region of Central Macedonia, Northern Greece

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Introduction

The current situation regarding forced migration has had an impact on European society by calling into question the preparation and capacities of governments to face the arrival of thousands of people who should have the same rights as European citizens: Basic rights such as the right to a decent housing, to receive a medical care or to access to education.

This has been especially the case of countries such as Italy and Greece, who have received the main number of people running away from the war in Syria. This phenomenon has revealed the strengths and weaknesses of each country, as well as its capacity of mobilising its citizens, thereby forcing the different governments to rethink their policies and resources. In this context, new tools appear necessary in order to face the necessities of treating forced migrants as equals, providing to them the same access to basic rights as to the regular citizens.

In this sense, education appears as a basic right for every child, as it is the basis of all the societies and it prepares us for the future. From education we can change everything, and everything needs to be changed in this specific moment. We must therefore rise to the occasion and prepare professionals in order to be up to standard in response to the needs of the children and society.

Inclusive education, thus, appears as something indispensable in a context of constant change, during which new tools and methodologies should be conceived and applied in the educational system in order to work with children who do not necessarily speak the same language as the majority, as well as those who come from completely different social and cultural backgrounds. The only way to avoid the exclusion of these children and to contribute to their complete integration is to implement an inclusive education for diversity.

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European schools are still litigating and learning how to better include new arrivals in their classrooms. Teachers and other professionals are discovering by themselves how to work to reach this total integration while other actors, such as local and international organizations, are trying to help them in this process.

The right of access to education for refugee children

The Convention of Geneva 1951 and the protocol of 1967 regarding the status of the refugees claims the importance of education as a basic right for everyone. In Europe, the rights of the refugee children are guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Being more concrete and focusing on the case of Greece, the *Greece Plan Response* presented by UNCHR states that, “the education sector faces problems with regards to the refugee children’s integration in Greek schools” and it presents as a solution the “engagement with civil society for advocacy and sensitization support”, as well as an “enhancement of intercultural education and social cohesion among Greek and refugee students”.

The tips included in the Report are related to different specific priorities regarding “regular attendance of the children”; the inclusion of “complementary non formal education”, including mother tongue education; and “special attention” in order to facilitate social integration, with the organization of inter-cultural and civic education activities for all children.¹

But following these facts, the Human Rights Watch Report: *Greece, No School for Many Asylum-Seeking Kids*, which was published in September 2017, states that the problematic of accessing to education is especially focused in the islands of Greece: “Greece’s Education Ministry should move quickly to implement positive new plans for the education of

¹ December 2016. *UNCHR Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe. January to December 2017*. Page 59

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asylum-seeking children on the Aegean islands and make schools accessible to all of them”, and it adds: “When the school began at september 2017, hundreds of asylum seeking children who are being prevented of leaving the islands due to a European Union deal with Turkey, remained out of school”.

Regarding this study, “Greece was planning to extend a program that provides special Greek classes and integration support for non-native speaking pupils to asylum-seeking children on the island.” Nevertheless, the report claims that this program excludes children who cannot obtain the proof of address required to enrol in the school. In the case of the islands, the Ministry of Education announced it would open afternoon classes in public schools and states that “the new integration program and the afternoon classes will both exclude children over age 15, and a delay in providing vaccinations to asylum-seeking children poses problems because vaccinations are required for school enrollment.” The Ministry estimated that both programs would start in mid-October (2017).

The report points to the fact that “the Ministry of Education should extend the programs to make formal education accessible to all asylum-seeking children of school-age as soon as possible, including for children over 15. It should speed up vaccinations so that the vaccination requirement is not a barrier to the right of all children to access to education. The ministry should end the arbitrary exclusion of children in refugee camps on the islands from public schools by opening the promised afternoon classes for them as soon as possible, and ensuring that they can obtain a proof of address to enroll.”

Quoting the same report, in the period of 2016-2017, it seems that Greece opened the afternoon preparatory classes with the aim of integrating asylum-seeking children into public schools on the mainland. These children could attend lessons of Greek, mathematics, English, sports, arts and computer science in the afternoons (between 2 and 6 pm). The data that we have regarding this initiative is that 2,643 had enrolled, but the program still didn’t cover the islands, where there is the biggest necessity of access to education. “For the 2017-2018 school years, the Ministry of Education has secured funding for 700 ZEP classes across the

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country. A UNHCR official told Human Rights Watch that the program would be the first opportunity for asylum-seeking children on Chios to go to school.”

With regards to the requirements in order to access public education, the article says: “Greek law requires certain vaccinations for school enrollment, but these are not available for all asylum-seeking children before the beginning of the school year. According to a coordinator of Médecins Sans Frontières, an international medical humanitarian organization that provides medical services to asylum-seekers in Greece, a lack of coordination between the Ministries of Health, Education, and Migration Policy is causing vaccination delays: “While vaccinations were expected to be finalized for all children eligible for ZEP (Zone of Educational Priorities) classes on Samos and Chios by mid-September, this may take until mid-October on Lesbos, said UNHCR officials on the islands.”

The report concludes saying that "Greece promised to make public schools accessible to asylum-seeking children last year, but completely left out children on the islands." ²

The Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe for 2017 – 2019, contains some recommendations and proposals in order to ensure that refugee and migrant children who would remain in Europe are provided with education in which there are immediate actions proposed for 2017 and further actions thought to be implemented between 2018 and 2019. All the proposals contain the idea of “linguistic integration”, that is to say the inclusion and usage of the different languages inside the classrooms.³

To conclude this point, we can affirm that gaining access to public education is an issue about which the European Union is concerned. Therefore, it appears as something essential to study and analyze in order to give some responses to the current situation regarding the refugee

² Human Rights Watch, September 2017. *Human Rights Watch, Greece: No School for Many Asylum-Seeking* available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59bf75664.html> [Accessed the 19th May 2018]

³ Council of Europe. May 2017, *Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe for 2017 – 2019*. Pages 17 – 18

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crisis. As a result, the aim of our research has always been to give some answers and shed some light on the issue in order to contribute to the future studies and consequently improve regarding this issue.

The access to education of refugee children in Greece. Focusing in the region of Central Macedonia

Our research has been carried out in Central Macedonia, concretely in the municipality of Paionia, part of the district of Kilkis, where a total of 1282 refugees (between Kilkis and Paionia) have been relocated from period of November 2016 until May 2018.⁴

The municipality of Paionia includes the villages of Polykastro, Axioupolis, Evropos, Livadia, Gorgopi and Goumenissa. Paionia is part of the Kilkis regional unit of Central Macedonia, Greece and it represents an area of 919.276 km². In 2011, the municipality of Paionia counted on a total 28,493 of population..

In the villages of Axioupolis, Gorgopi and Goumenissa, a total of 44 children in situation of refugees or asylum seekers are attending Primary School, regarding the last data collected from the school year 2017-2018.

The object of our study was to analyze the current situation concerning the access to school for the refugee children residing in this specific area of Northern Greece. To do that, we have carried out 17 interviews with experts and professionals of the educational field, people specialized on working with refugees, the different organizations working on the field and children and parents in situation of asylum seekers who are currently residing in Greece.

⁴ This data has been calculated the 31st of May 2018 and corresponds to the one provided by the organization OMNES, so they are part of the Housing Project Circulation and it corresponds to the number of refugees relocated by the organization in apartments in Central Macedonia's region.

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Our research has been focused on the study of the situation of the children living in the urban areas of Paionia, so we started asking ourselves if all the children from the families who have been relocated in these areas are currently enrolled and attending the school.

Following the results obtained from the interviews, we concluded that the numbers were positive: almost a 90% of enrolment and attendance in the case of the children between 6 and 12 years old in the schools of Gorgopi, Goumenissa and Axioupolis, in the period while our study has been developed.⁵

The integration model followed in this region consists of a model based on reception classes: separated sessions in which the new pupils of all ages are together with one teacher who helps them with the learning of the language or other subjects established by the same educational center.

The new arrivals have a total of two years of reception classes since their enrolment in the center and they attend between two and four hours of this special classes everyday. Afterwards, they join the rest of the group..

We could not reach a conclusion about the effectiveness of this program for two reasons. Firstly, because the model in practice is relatively new. While on the other hand, the different schools interviewed were giving different versions, thereby implementing this model in completely different ways.

The use of language, for instance, is an example of how different are the centers working with the refugee children. Moreover, it demonstrates the importance of providing sufficient preparation for the teachers in the future in order to face the situation of having new pupils who do not speak the same language as the others inside of a classroom.

⁵ This data has been provided by the organization OMNES, in charge of the enrolment and monitoring of the refugee children, during an interview on the 15th of April 2018.

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In some cases, teachers are able to communicate with the children only in English, while in some other situations, they only speak Greek. This creates an issue inside the classroom, since the children and the teacher do not speak the same language and so there is a communication barrier.

At the same time, we observed that some teachers try to use their own methodologies while they look for solutions to break through this obstacle. For instance, they give to the children the vocabulary written in Arabic, but in most of the cases the children do not know how to write or read in this language. In some other cases, the students are Kurdish, so they do not know Arabic.

Organizations as mediators and supporters in the process of schooling for the refugee families: Open Cultural Center

In Paionia's area and Kilkis different non-governmental organizations are working in the field in order to provide refugee children with their right of access to education. This is the case of organizations such as OMNES or Open Cultural Center, who are mainly working in the urban areas and who work as supporters and mediators with different schools in the region.

OMNES is in charge of the distribution of refugee families in apartments, but they also offer assistance, support and accompaniment to the ones who have been and are being relocated in the different villages of Paionia's region.

Regarding OCC, apart from offering legal and health assistance, this organization works mainly providing educational support to the refugees and mediating between the schools and the families who have been relocated in the urban areas and have children and youth in the schooling age.

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In this sense, we observed that OCC and OMNES are the ones who are providing special support to the educational centers, such as psychosocial support and translators. Additionally, they also eventually offer trainings and seminars to the teachers and the schools in order to provide them new tools and methodologies to work with migrants or refugees.

Both organizations are in cooperation and constant communication with the Ministry of Education through the Responsible of the Education of Refugees (REC) in the area of Kilkis. In fact, during the development of our study, one of the conclusions that we reached is that the role of these organizations is, in practice, to act as a bridge between the refugee families, the schools and the Ministry of Education. Both organizations are the ones who, in practice, notify to the REC when new families are allocated in the urban areas and when the children need to be enrolled in the schools.

The same happens when the families who asked for asylum in other countries are accepted and they need to register their children in schools. OCC, for instance, drives the parents to the school and provides them translators in order to fill up all the papers and provide all the documents needed for the enrolment or deregistration of the children from the center.

In order to enrol in the school, the families need to provide the following documents to the center: an asylum seeker card and a paper or other document which indicates where are they residing in the moment of enrolment in the center. They also need a vaccination and a document provided by the doctor which indicates that the child can follow the whole school program without any problem. OMNES and OCC also help the families on the acquisition of the different documents and on providing them to the schools, as well as they monitor the itinerary of the children in the school.

Open Cultural Center, apart from offering this specific support and facilities to the families, the school and the Ministry of Education, it also offers informal education to the refugee adults, teenagers and children who come from Nea Kavala refugee camp and from the villages of Axioupolis, Gorgopi and Goumenissa. OCC also provides legal and health

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assistance to the refugee community, as well as psychosocial support for the children and teenagers who are registered in their center in Greece.

During the development of our research, we put special attention and we were working as participant observers on the different activities carried out especially by OCC, in order to study how their contributions can have an impact on the current process of integration and schooling of the refugee children in Paionia.

The aim of OCC is to provide access to education to the adults, who do not have access to education at all in this region and to work on cooperation with Primary and Secondary school in order to reinforce their scholar curriculum, giving some specific support to the new arrivals and contributing to their better integration and inclusion in the classrooms.

Their centers are located in the village of Polykastro, where they have a learning space, a community center and a leisure space for the children between 0 until 5 years old (age in which they need to enrol in the school).

OMNES and OCC follow and monitor the itinerary of the children in the schools and they intervene if any problem is detected, such as scholar absenteeism or other issues which could be related to the familiar situation of the children or the teenagers. In case of a specific or more sophisticated intervention is needed they directly contact the organization ARSIS⁶, which offers specific social support for minors who are in dangerous or difficult situations.

⁶ ARSIS - Association for the Social Support of Youth is a Non Governmental Organization, specializing in the social support of youth that are in difficulty or danger and in the advocacy of their rights. The main target is the prevention of youth marginalisation, the elaboration of policies which defend youth rights and the active social support towards disadvantaged young people. ARSIS was established in 1992 and since then it operates in Athens, Thessaloniki, Volos, Alexandroupoli, Kozani and Tirana due to the active participation of members, volunteers and young people. Via: <http://arsis.gr/en/> [Accessed the 15th April 2018]

Conclusions and proposals

Numbers seem to show a positive assessment about the access to education of the refugee children in Paionia's area, but there is still work to do regarding the specific needs as much the children as the schools have in order to face this new situation.

More preparation for the teachers and for the educational centers in general appears as something essential in order to better respond to the needs of these new arrivals and to know how to act for a better inclusion and subsequently integration. Some specific methodologies and tools should be implemented inside of the classrooms as well in order to do not allow the teachers to contribute for an exclusion of part of the pupils because of their incapability to transmit the knowledge in a more inclusive way.

At the same time, it is indispensable to include specific professionals, such as psychotherapists, who work either with the professors as with the children. It appears essential to take into account the fact that, in some cases, these children come from very traumatic situation which leads them to a lack of attention or difficulties for focusing in class. This can show difficulties not only for the children but also for the teachers, who might feel frustrated and incapable to do their job and can lead them to other psychological problems.

The issue of the translators it also appears as something indispensable because, as we have already seen, one of the biggest problems is the obstacle of the language. In this sense, the schooling centers should have some translators who could help them during the development of the reception classes, as well as in case there is a need to speak with the parents or with the children themselves.

The main conclusion we reached on our research is the importance of the provision of specific support and professionals, that currently the NGOs are providing, while the Ministry of Education is not providing to the schools so far. In case the schools need a translator they

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usually contact directly OMNES and OCC who provides transportation - in case is needed - and/or translators in order to mediate between the children, the parents and the school.

Summing up, the organizations working in the field are the ones who are giving these facilities to the schools, either during the schooling time, or after it. Hence, we should work in order to give more facilities and means to these NGOs, because their work appears essential for a better integration of the children in the schooling centers, so consequently in the society.