Teaching L2 for students with a refugee/migrant background in Greece: Teachers' perceptions about reception, integration and multicultural identities

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Abstract

Refugee education has been an important challenge for the Greek educational system and for the teaching community. New supporting structures (i.e., Reception Facilities for Refugee Education [RFRE]), operating after the end of the regular school day, have been created to enable newcomers living in Refugee Accommodation Centers to learn (mainly) Greek as a second language before accessing the mainstream school program. On the other hand, refugee students living in urban locations are enrolled in mainstream classes with or without the support of parallel Reception Classes (RC). Most of the educators teaching refugee children, and particularly these working on RFREs, did not have any relevant previous experience or specialization and, at the same time, they received minimum support in training or professional development.

This paper is based on a qualitative research focusing on perceptions, attitudes and practices of primary and secondary school teachers in relation to refugee students' second language learning and integration into Greek public schools. Interviews were conducted with 60 teachers in RFREs, RCs, and mainstream classes, including Intercultural Schools. Despite the difficulties they faced, many teachers seemed to move towards a positive understanding of their students' multiple identities, focusing not only on L2 acquisition and competency building, but also on empowerment and the development of a mutual intercultural understanding. Students' resilience and efforts helped their teachers deal with stereotypes about identity and otherness and reformulate their assumptions about effective teaching practices. These experiences seemed to lead some of the educators to a deeper critical reflection; they also lead to the development of teachers' intercultural competence and facilitated a "crossing borders" transformative process.

Keywords

refugee/migrant education, intercultural education, teaching L2, teachers' professional development

Introduction: The situation of children with refugee background in Greece

The educational management of the recent refugee flows has constituted a major challenge to the main host societies, leading, among other things, to minor or bigger changes to the educational models regarding the reception and integration of students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (McBrien, 2005; European Commission, 2019).

In the European Union states in 2017, 303,360 children were in the process of application for international protection. The European Network of Ombudspersons for Children[1] notes that, although access to education of children with refugee /migrant

backgrounds has improved, meaning that the waiting times for registration have decreased and the number of children enrolled in schools has increased, the integration of these children in educational settings is incomplete. In some European states, refugees[2] and asylum seekers still have no access to the formal education system, at least in some regions, while the newly arrived students are often placed in preparatory classes (European Network of Ombudspersons for Children [ENOC], 2018).

Until spring 2016, Greece, a country with a population of 11,000,000, has been indeed treated, concerning refugee flows, as a transit country. Refugees entering Greece were recorded and, within a shorter or longer time frame, proceeded with their journey towards the states of Central Europe. After the closure of the "Balkan Route" for refugees passing through Greece, and the restriction of "legal" transit to other European countries only to those eligible for programs of resettlement or family reunification, approximately 62,000 refugees became stranded in Greece (General Secretariat for Press and Information, 2017). At the beginning of 2020, the number of refugees in Greece was estimated at 112,300 (UNHCR, 2019) while children with refugee/migrant backgrounds in the Greek territory reached 42,500 (a 50% increase within 2020), of whom 31,000 were school-age and 4,815 were unaccompanied minors[3] (UNICEF, 2020; Education Sector Working Group [ESWG], 2020). Of these children, 26% reside in Reception and Identification Centers in the Northeast Aegean Islands (with near zero access opportunities to the formal education system), another 26% in Open Accommodation Sites in the mainland, and 33% in apartments and hotels for families. Lower numbers are found in shelters for unaccompanied minors and in informal accommodation arrangements

(UNICEF, 2020). While the number of children with a refugee background in Greece increases, access to quality education remains a major challenge (Ombudsperson, 2019; Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019).

The integration of children with refugee background into formal education

While up to March 2016 nonformal education, provided by International Organizations, Academic Institutions, Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organizations covered, more or less efficiently, some of the urgent educational needs of the refugee population, the essential dilemma, especially after eliminating the possibility of formal movement to other countries, lied in the policies of reception and integration of these students in the public school. The existing legal framework in Greece was clear in safeguarding access to education for minors third-country[4] nationals (regardless of their residency status), their inclusion in compulsory education, and the possibility for enrollment of children whose families are asylum seekers, come from areas of prevailing unrest, or are protected as refugees,[5] even without the required documentation and certificates.

Based on the existing framework and provisions, there were three potential options. The first option was the integration of the overall refugee student population in the public mainstream school, supported by the existing legal framework (Reception Classes and Supplementary Tuition), while following (and improving) the model (that had already been applied since the 1990s) regarding students with mainly migrant backgrounds. The second option concerned the creation of special education facilities inside the reception-identification and accommodation centers. Finally, the third option focused on the development of a new "bridge

system" between the two previous policies. It is important to highlight that these policy options have already been implemented, in different ways, in various EU host countries as well as in Turkey (UNESCO, 2019).

The selected option was the third one. The 2016-2017 school year was defined as "pre-integration" or "transitional," and the focus was placed on kindergarten programs operating within the Refugee Accommodation Centers, and the creation of Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs) for refugee children that reside in Accommodation Centers. The RFREs were functioning during afternoon hours (14.00-18.00) in primary and secondary schools near the accommodation facilities. Apart from the two aforementioned educational measures, there was a provision for refugee children residing in the urban space to be included in the morning mainstream schedule of the schools, with the support of Reception Classes.

The above measures created a system of access to differentiated educational services, depending on children's residency status. The children residing in the urban space had access to the (mainstream) morning school (with all specified educational provisions), while the children residing in Accommodation Centers were enrolled in an afternoon, short-time educational program of reduced thematic areas. To be mentioned that RFREs attendance is not connected to a certification of a particular educational level, given that students of RFREs, contrary to those of Reception Classes, are not enrolled in classes equivalent to their age and their studies in RFREs are only acknowledged through a certificate of attendance. Finally, in the case of Greece and according to the Ombudsperson and the Network of the Rights of the Children on the Move, the integration of the children with refugee backgrounds in the education system was designed "on the basis of

division and creation of two parallel systems, depending on the place of residence of the children" (Ombudsperson, 2019).

In the meantime, there was a debate within the educational community regarding the suitable policies of reception and integration. The main issue was whether establishment and functioning of RFREs corresponds (exclusively or predominantly) to management-administrative challenges (e.g., the lack of capacity of adjacent schools to host the number of school-age children residing in [large] Accommodation Centers), or to an educational approach that implies that for this particular group it is necessary to have a different form of education, separated from mainstream school, either for a shorter or a longer period of time. In the last case, the question that inevitably arises is why these two different approaches are appropriate or adopted for the same population, solely by reference to the place of residence or accommodation. In other words, it must be answered why a reception and integration policy that is adopted for children residing in the urban space is not considered to be appropriate for the children in Accommodation Centers and vice versa. During the 2018-2019 school year, out of the 12,867 enrolled students of refugee background, 4,557 studied in RFRE, 4,050 in the morning program of schools with Reception Classes, and 4,240 in the morning program of schools without Reception Classes (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2019). However, despite the significant efforts that were undertaken during this period, many of the students with refugee backgrounds were found, either at an initial stage or even until today, excluded from public education, with the children who were stuck in the Reception and Identification Centers of the Eastern Aegean islands being the most striking example.

The research

The research[6] presented here was based on qualitative methodology, focusing on participants' meanings and aiming to capture a complex picture of the issue under study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It was carried out from March 2016 to March 2018, with the aim of capturing and critically examining the perceptions, the implicit personal theories (Rando & Menges,1991) and the attitudes of educators who teach in Reception Classes, Mainstream Classes, Intercultural Schools, or RFREs concerning refugee children, as well as these educators' beliefs on reception - integration methodologies and practices and their needs for support of their professional development.

The research included semi-structured, anonymous, and confidential interviews with 60 educators involved in the education of students with refugee or migrant backgrounds in RFREs (17 teachers), Reception Classes (18 teachers), Intercultural Schools (8 teachers), and in mainstream school classes (17 teachers) of primary and secondary education all over Greece. |These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using the content analysis methodology, where codes emerged and categories were formulated (Bazeley, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2015).

Educators' views on students with refugee background

The teachers who were interviewed represent four distinct groups: The first group consisted of teachers in the RFREs of Primary and Secondary Education. In most cases, these are part-time substitute teachers who are not integrated into schools' permanent core staff, and who hold little classroom experience and no training on teaching non-native speakers of Greek. The second group consisted of educators who were hired to teach refugee students within the morning program of public schools, in the context of Reception Classes. This concerns mainly substitute teachers with little or more teaching experience and (most of them) not familiar with teaching non-Greek speakers. The third group of participants were the educators employed in the mainstream program (with or without RCs) of schools with large numbers of students speaking "other languages." This concerns educators with significant teaching experience and familiar with teaching in multicultural environments. Finally, the fourth group consisted of educators of Intercultural Schools of Primary and Secondary Education. This concerns, in most cases, educators with significant experience in teaching students whose native language is not Greek; many of these educators are also qualified with a postgraduate or doctoral degree in intercultural education and/or teaching Greek as a second language.

Teachers' first contact with refugee students

The vast majority of students with a refugee or migrant profile in the year 2016-2017 were hosted in RFREs. Hence, substitute teachers, generally with zero experience and without any preparation or support, found themselves working in a particularly demanding context with students for whom Greek was a "foreign" language and who were out of school for a significant period of time (from several months to many years); moreover, their living conditions and expectations for resettlement to other countries were not supportive to a new learning effort.

Thus, during their first contact, RFRE educators appeared to be dominated by feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and fear:

The truth is that on the first day I felt uncomfortable… I even asked about vaccines, since there was a big fuss at that time, but they assured me that everything was fine. The main issue was that I had never taught people who had no knowledge of Greek while, for example, I didn't know if they knew English. Luckily, in the class there was a child who knew English.

(Educator 10, RFRE, May 2016)

In fact, I was scared, nobody could define the context…The children arrive, you get in, you shut the door and you are alone…And you are saying "what am I supposed to do?" And then fear goes away and you are saying "Well, we just need to get to know each other…to tell them who I am and find out who they are." And when I leave, I am stressed again, knowing that I have something new to handle and I need to find how to do this… The next day comes in a few hours… What am I going to do?

(Educator 29, RFRE, May 2016)

Nonetheless, it appears that for many educators, this new role they undertake constitutes a professional as well as a personal challenge:

From the beginning I said…Okay, I don't know what this is, but I'll do it. It's difficult, yet interesting. And I knew that there were colleagues who declined the position and others who accepted the job at the beginning and then quit. For this reason, there was something in me saying that it's worth the effort. One must indeed like challenges, it's not easy…

(Educator 6, RFRE, May 2016)

Okay, it was by no means easy to have to deal with your friends saying to you "What is wrong with you? Why are you doing this to yourself?" And then having the parents of the Greek students threatening to shut down the school and some colleagues pretending they don't see the situation, as if these children do not exist.

(Educator 7, RFRE, March 2017)

On the other hand, coming into contact with this specific group of students, getting to know them, and realizing their personal routes and experiences have led many educators to activate an increased empathy and interest for groups that are marginalized, and to invest in practices that support and empower them.

The other children always have a teacher interested in them –and the context itself supports them –thus there should be a teacher for these children as well, one who will be interested in helping them. I was a marginalized student too and there were teachers who helped me move forward…

(Educator 37, RC, April 2018)

It's not only what the average person sees…Children who are scared, traumatized… You see the immense strength these children have. Children that smile at you even though they don't understand what you are saying to them. Children that try, having no home, not knowing what will happen with their lives tomorrow, to learn a difficult language. This indeed gives you strength.

(Educator 9, RFRE, April 2017)

Setting goals and planning

Even without previous experience or support, many of the educators were familiarized, through their everyday teaching experience, with basic principles of communicative and task-based approaches for second-language teaching and planned lessons that focused on language use related to their students' daily lives.

> *My initial expectation was for children to be able to communicate basic things in simple language. To be able to stand within a specific context. To play, to hide, to count, to speak about their feelings, to tell they are scared or in pain.*

(Educator 7, RFRE, April 2017)

However, the fact that these educators did not have any systematic support and training supervision explains, to a certain extent, a gradual withdrawal on language teaching models that focus on mechanical acquisition of language structures and vocabulary, and on a metalanguage approach of the language system. The class observation (accompanying some of the interviews with the educators) highlighted that even the teachers whose priority was specifically to support the students' need to acquire communication skills that respond to their daily needs, in practice they tended to devote most of their lessons to vocabulary presentation and implementation of mechanical gap-filling exercises (e.g., "put the verbs into the correct form").

Besides, the focus on the mechanical teaching of the language system emerges from the words of many of RFREs educators:

> *Well, at first, I used only English and gradually I reached the point where I used only Greek. This is what we did in the lesson: check spelling, reading from the book... Not everyone could read, particularly the younger children couldn't make it. And especially the children from Iraq who were not attending regularly. Older children learnt reading; they were flying high. So, we did spelling, endings etc.*

(Educator 60, RFRE, April 2018)

On the other hand, the educators in schools with a significant number of multilingual students appeared to be working more consciously towards inclusive practices that reinforce communication and interaction and employ tools of experiential learning and differentiated teaching:

> *We ran a RC II [Reception Class, type II: a second teacher -inside the mainstream class- supports students speaking other than the school's languages] –this worked. This means that we were two educators in the classroom with respective, equivalent functions. That is, we haven't split the children into foreign language speakers and non-foreign language speakers, advanced and non-advanced. This is the third year working with co-teaching. We also visit different classes, we do projects, we mix students from different classes –and all teachers know every child of the school.*

(Educator 19, mainstream program, May 2016)

The constant mobility of the students' population, the absence of basic information about this specific group, the lack of a frame of

reference, and little or no interaction with the school community seem to constitute the major challenges for the RFRE educators. In this context, some teachers sought tools and methodologies that led them to the renegotiate and adjust the learning goals to meet the needs of their students to facilitate differentiated learning.

> *The population of children changes constantly… You are left with seven familiar faces and thirteen new ones. But within a month they had learnt the alphabet and thirty words related to surroundings and feelings. This way, you work both in an individualized manner and in groups. Each one has their portfolio and you can see what they have done and what they can do.*

(Educator 9, RFRE, May 2017)

In some cases, though, the educators were surprised when the first outcomes, either in relation to educational goals or integration in the school context, became visible:

> *We are at the end of the second week and everyone is working very quietly. And one girl raises her hand and says: "Miss, is so quiet…" I'm feeling a shiver saying this.*

(Educator 9, RFRE, May 2018)

Teachers' need for support

During the 2016-2017 school year, the RFREs educators appeared to be completely deprived of support. This lack, apart from the obvious gaps and failures at the level of educational practices, increases the educators' feelings of insecurity and frustration (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children, 2017). On the other hand, for a group of

educators this constituted an incentive for a personal journey of exploring methodologies, material, and educational practices that would be appropriate for this particular educational environment.

> *After the first contact, you turn and have a look at the material they sent you… And you are saying: "They can't have sent this." You put it aside and you are saying "I will go back over it in one or three months," you are definitely getting tired, but you are saying "it's time to use the tools I have and build something." This is how the first day ends: a bit overwhelmed, a bit anxious and with the strength to move on, to find out from where you must start…*

(Educator 7, RFRE, May 2017)

Permanent teachers, with experience in schools with high concentrations of multilingual students, possessed a critical stance not only in relation to the insufficient support but also in relation to the content of the educational material.

> *In the morning program, we used as educational material what we considered appropriate…In RFRE they took the material of Muslim Minority Children Education. Why? What is the relevance? Is it because they are Muslims? For me it's inappropriate… The children of Thrace[7] are Greek citizens and for them the Greek language is something different. They have different contact….*

(Educator 19, mainstream program, October 2018)

The lack of appropriate preparation at all levels and the sense of being alone against

demanding working conditions permeated the words of the educators who were placed in RFREs in 2016-2017.

> *The truth is that I didn't have any relevant training. They put me in deep water. "This is it, go." And I have never been certain, neither I am now, that what I was doing was correct. I definitely need training. Mainly teaching samples, practice, microteaching, samples of material. I was alone, searching on the internet …*

(Educator 10, RFRE, May 2017)

> *And on Monday we were notified to go for lesson on Tuesday.*

(Educator 9, RFRE, May 2017)

In this first phase, the search for support was directed towards educators with greater experience in teaching in multicultural environments, some motivated School Principals and School Counselors, as well as Refugee Education Coordinators.[8]

> *The School Counselor was very supportive but what can just one person do? You have the teacher, a principal exhausted with bureaucracy and displaced from the pedagogical guidance...functioning only as a source of fear for the school... and you have a school counselor, and that's all... There are no intermediate "guides." You can always create paths, trust people and ask for help... sharing your problems, without feeling threatened...*

(Educator 14, RFRE, May 2017)

> *I had been supported by the Refugee Education Coordinator, the Counselor*

> *and the other teachers...We were discussing...*

(Educator 15, RFRE, May 2017)

The requests for support made by the educators were generally focused on case studies targeting practical, everyday issues and challenges, through which effective practices and collective coordination and collaboration could emerge:

> *I wanted both a theoretical and practical support: microteaching, for example... I was sitting and studying... We should have been prepared intensively two weeks before... And every two weeks, there should be coordinating and exchanging activities, a common path.*

(Educator 10, RFRE, May 2017)

What makes an educator effective?

Trying to recontextualize their experience, the educators with whom we spoke focused particularly on the communication with the students, the development of a safe space of mutual trust and openness, something that could compensate for the lack of technical expertise in teaching second language:

> *The relationship with the students was incredible. We did whatever we said. We had an amazing cooperation. They never insulted me, I never insulted them either. I never had to raise my voice. There was love between us...*

(Educator 17, RFRE, May 2017)

> *What my advice would be now to someone who is about to enter in this job... It takes a lot of patience, until communication issues are getting*

resolved. And if you are biased, don't get involved on this area. I saw educators not accepting the children, not being able to touch them, feeling repulsed, scared…

(Educator 29, RFRE, January 2018)

However, when emotional intimacy and involvement with children are not delimited in a way so that professional space and time are separated from personal space and time, this has been also experienced by teachers as a "weak spot."

I am strict with the children, but when I went to the camp the day before yesterday all of them were running to hug me. You need to set limits…But with acceptance… And my weak spot was that I got too much involved. And I was greatly affected when students begun to leave. Generally, I was taking everything home.

(Educator 11, RFRE, May 2017)

The development of reciprocal relationships of trust and intimacy, and the sense that the educators' work is important to the lives of these children, appeared to be the main counterbalances to dealing with the difficulties, the exhaustion, and the lack of support:

If I would opt for it again? Of course, I would. For many reasons… The idea that they learn the language from you, that after a while you see them capable of communicating, speaking, is huge satisfaction … Not to mention the love I received.

(Educator 38, RC, May 2017)

Exhaustion is what dominates today… I want to get rest… The relationships that were created though are a big chapter. Even the fact that one day I tell the principal that I am exhausted, and he replies "many things took place this year…good things" is a big boost.

(Educator 18, RFRE, May 2017)

Educational planning and reflection paths

The demarcation and development of a context of normalcy and a mutually acceptable system of rights and rules appeared to be the major challenge to the RFREs educators, thus leaving the educational goals in a secondary place.

And then you must set the rules… And after that, you just start the lesson. You take a look at your material and then at their needs and you sort of make the contract: I don't speak, I don't hit, I sit down, I am inside the classroom. Rules through games. Safety is a big issue: you are an educator alone in the school, it gets darker. And you have many age groups…

(Educator 46, RFRE, May 2018)

We had children with lots of anger, but we didn't know what is going on…There was no contact with the family. And you didn't have feedback…The students were leaving, you didn't know where they were going or what you were doing… and you were feeling that maybe this is a sort of parking. And then you adjust your goals, have a goal for each day and not long-term ones…

(Educator 14, RFRE, January 2018)

Finally, for a significant group of educators, it appeared that reflecting upon educational practices and teaching goals was connected to broader processes of introspection that concern elements of professional and personal identity. These educators felt that the contact with this group helped them redefine their perspectives, belief systems, mental patterns, and attitudes:

> *I would say that I am lucky that just before my retirement I found myself in this situation. And I came to remember what it means to be an educator and why I had opted for these studies and this profession. Honestly, I feel lucky and blessed.*

(Educator 47, RC, May 2018)

> *I now look at Education from a different perspective and not only for these children. That as educators we need to look at what comes after, what our work means for the future of children.*

(Educator 37, RC, April 2019)

Despite the fact that in other research (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019), the educators seem to feel ambivalent about the educational context they regard as more appropriate and effective for students with a refugee background, in this research nearly all of the educators we interviewed (57 out of 60) supported the belief, albeit with different degrees of intensity, that the best practice is for these students to be integrated into the morning mainstream program. Especially for the educators of RFREs, the lack of students' contact with the school community reduces significantly both the

motivation to learn a new language and the prospect for social integration in general:

> *We were getting into the lesson and they were trying to speak this new language. But only with me. They would speak again their own languages with their classmates, and this makes sense. They had nobody to speak Greek with. And, on the other hand, they were coming to an empty school – as if they had transferred two containers from the camp to the yard of a deserted school.*

(Educator 10, RFRE, May 2017)

These educators, although they understood the administrative and logistical problems that, in some cases, were involved in integrating a large number of students from some Accommodation Centers to the morning program of adjacent schools, they eventually experienced the RFRE context as an obstacle to their effort to develop conditions of educational and psychosocial normalcy.

> *I would put these children in adjacent schools, into Reception Classes. The subject teachers are certainly available in this context, while the benefit of having a Reception Class would be greater. Maybe the problem would be at the places where many children are concentrated, and few schools are nearby.*

(Educator 11, RFRE, May 2017)

> *The schedule is an obstacle...from two to six the first graders are tired. You had only one or two breaks to come into contact with the Greek students. We were going for a break and we didn't hear anyone speaking Greek. We were*

at an empty school. And eventually these children realized that they were different. That they lived on credit. They were getting into a class that was for the Greek students in the morning – we couldn't hang anything on the wall…

(Educator 14, RFRE, January 2018)

On the other hand, the educators at the schools of the urban centers where both RFREs and RCs were implemented, observed that some refugee students in the morning program who were transferred to the RFRE when they started operating (so that their movement from the Accommodation Center to the school to be facilitated through buses provided for them), returned to the morning program after a short period of time, since, as these students stated, "the afternoon program was not school."

We had the children registered in the morning program since summer, before the RFRE. In the morning we had shared activities with the children of RFRE. Some children left the morning program in order to come in the afternoon by the buses, but they returned. Because they had the feeling that it was not a school in the afternoon. Gradually, some moved from RFRE to the morning program – almost half of the RFRE. Of course, the children wanted this…

(Educator 22, RFRE, January 2018)

The general feeling of the educators of the morning program was that the RFRE does not resemble a real school, but it is more like a supplementary school, while the inclusion that is developed in the morning program is beneficial both to the students and the educators.

For me, RFRE should in the morning too. Although RFREs are not really needed. There should be reception classes, in the way that we have been doing it all these years. And look, when the children came to RFRE, there was a big fuss, they were climbing the drainpipes, they were jumping from the handrails. Panic! When we switched them to the morning, this changed…they begun to follow the rules by seeing what the other students were doing…

(Educator 28, morning program, October 2017)

It is certain that the program which functioned in the morning, together with all the other children of the school, was positive and not only for the children but also for the educator. Imagine an educator being alone in an empty school, in the afternoon, especially in winter…Not knowing anyone to seek help from, in case something happens to you. Feeling that this is not a school but supplementary tuition, a sideline … For the children the morning program was something else. They got socialized, made friends, became integrated.

(Educator 38, Reception Class, January

2018)

Conclusions and suggestions

From 2016 to the present day, the access of students with refugee/migrant backgrounds to public education has been increasing, albeit with obstacles, while the COVID-19 pandemic has added more challenges, related with restriction of mobility and limited access to

internet and digital devices, especially for refugee children residing in Reception and Identification Centers (on the islands) and Accommodation Centers (on the mainland).

What is particularly encouraging is the fact that, compared to the attitudes of the general population towards people with migrant or refugee backgrounds, as reflected in different and based on diversified scope and methodologies recent studies (Dixon et al., 2019; Gonzalez-Barrera & Connor, 2019), it is safe to say that the attitudes of the educators we interviewed, having their own diversity and contradictions, were notably more positive. It is remarkable that, while in the research "More in Common" (Dixon et al., 2019) only 1 out of 5 Greeks regard migration as a positive factor for the Greek society and whereas at least 1 out of 2 believe that our identity is in peril and needs to be protected, the educators of our research were considerably more positive with respect to dilemmas such as "the danger of cultural distortion," "the decline of the education level," and "the degradation of schools" (dilemmas that have been part of the interviews' key concepts). Regarding the options of immediate integration in mainstream schools, or the necessity of a preparatory year or years, almost all of the educators seemed to believe that the learning of both the Greek language and the other subjects, as well as the reschooling of the children, could be achieved with greater speed, success, and quality within an inclusive context. In the group of educators with greater experience in schools, including those that host students speaking "other languages," the option of inclusion in the morning program appeared to be the only way forward for effective educational integration. The educators involved in the education of students with a refugee/migrant background appeared to differ substantially from the dominant discourse that categorizes these students as multi-traumatized, requiring special "educational care." On the contrary, they describe children having traumas and anxiety, experiencing exceptionally harsh living conditions, but who are, however, full of immense resilience, life energy, and in need of integration and interaction with their peers. They recognized the difficulties, the gaps, and the problems that have accrued since the out-of-school periods without, however, adopting deficit-theory schemes. Instead, many of them acknowledged that refugee students have a particularly rich variety of life skills, positive attitudes, and resilience, elements that can enrich the entire educational community. Through the daily contact and the sharing of their personal histories, experiences of border-crossing were developed (Howard, 2006; Bartolomé, 2007) and the educators were rendered allies and facilitators of their students' paths, seeking alternative solutions outside strictly predetermined contexts.

It seems that for the children with refugee backgrounds, the (often challenging) reaffirmation of the right of access to education is not always associated with a quality and effective education, while, despite the intentions, in many cases this is accompanied by a gradual descent into a parallel and segregated education. On the other hand, international researchers, organizations, and networks underscore the need to integrate the students with migrant/refugee backgrounds into the national education systems, since the interaction with the host community fosters both the acquisition of the language and other subjects, including the familiarization with nonverbal practices, as well as social cohesion, while the transmission to parallel and segregated systems entails education of lower quality, and –given that this form of education is not certified– it does not promote the development of educational

pathways (ENOC, 2018; UNESCO, 2019; FUNHCR, 2012).

Finally, despite significant progress, the education that students with refugee backgrounds receive, both in Greece and in most reception countries, does not seem to prevent the emergence of a lost generation with poor educational experiences and exceptionally narrow qualifications for the future. The educators in this research offer some minimum prerequisites that need to be taken into consideration if we are to reverse this dynamic. These prerequisites first focus on the enrollment of children in formal, mainstream preschool, primary and secondary education (including vocational training) within one month of their arrival in the reception country (ENOC, 2018). What is necessary to ensure school success is the development of a mechanism for monitoring schooling and processing specialized interventions for the prevention of dropouts and irregular attendance (Ombudsperson, 2019 & ENOC 2018). It is also important to limit RFREs to cases where any other option is certainly not feasible (that is when there are no school units capable of absorbing the pupil population of the overcrowded Accommodation or Reception and Identification Centers). In this case, there should be an explicit and binding provision for the transfer of the students to the morning program, within three months, dispersing them over the adjacent schools or neighboring areas (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019) and the gradual transformation of RFREs into a kind of a Supplementary Class that offers accelerated remedial teaching after the end of the morning mainstream program.

At the same time, what is needed is the consolidation of the functioning of Reception Classes by supporting the educators and the school units, also enabling the differentiation of the curriculum and the educational materials

per level of education, depending on the students' profile and the periods they have been out-of-school. Finally, specialized catch-up programs for the out-of-school students (mainly adolescents) are also necessary and should be designed and implemented in subjects apart from language (Math, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Social Sciences), while supporting languages of origin as a means to reinforce both learning preparedness and identity balance is also needed at the level of school unit or clusters of school units.

All the above suggestions are clearly connected to the need for support of the professional development of the educators, through models that employ experiential methodologies, those oriented towards the actual learning challenges, those focused on procedures of reflection in relation to effective planning and practices, and those that support the development of teachers' intercultural competence.

Notes

[1] The European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) is a not-for-profit association of independent children's rights institutions (ICRIs). Its mandate is to facilitate the promotion and protection of the rights of children, as formulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (http://enoc.eu/).
[2] For the terminology concerning refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, refer to: https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/44937/migrant-definition
[3] An unaccompanied child is a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is, attained earlier and who is "separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so. https://www.unhcr.org/3d4f91cf4.pdf
[4] Third-Country National: Any person who is not a citizen of the European Union within the meaning of Art. 20(1) of TFEU and who is not a person enjoying the European Union right to free movement, as defined in Art. 2(5) of

the [Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code)](#)
[5] See Art. 72 in Law No 3386/2005 (Greek Government Gazette A 212/23-08-2005) and later Art. 13, Law No 4540/ Greek Government Gazette A 91/ 22-5-2018.
[6] The research constitutes part of G. Simopoulos's unpublished postdoctoral research at the University of Thessaly, supervised by K. Magos, Assistant Professor. It was implemented through a scholarship offered by Greek State Scholarship Foundation through the "Enabling post-doctoral researchers" project as part of the "Human Resources Development, Education and Life-long Learning" program, co-funded by the European Social Fund and the Greek State.
[7] Thrace is a region with an important presence of a Muslim Minority.
[8] Refugee Education Coordinators have been a newly developed body of experienced teachers to work as liaisons between Refugee Accommodation Centers and Schools.

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