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## The Refugee Trees: Treescapes as Intercultural Bridges

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# The Refugee Trees: Treescapes as Intercultural Bridges

*Kostas Magos and Irida Tsevreni*

## INTRODUCTION

Forests, groves, and parks, as well as any area with trees, can be a suitable setting for helping develop students' environmental knowledge and awareness. Even a single tree as a subject of thoughtful observation can give children opportunities for discussion around many issues, such as those of environmental protection, endangered species, human beings' relationship with nature, and many more. There have been studies of innovative, experiential educational methods focusing on the interaction of children and young people with treescapes. These methods include different approaches, tools, and pedagogical techniques, such as nature journaling, mindfulness and contemplative techniques (Flowers et al., 2014; Tsevreni, 2021), art-based environmental education techniques (Hunter-Doniger, 2021), and ethnographic walks (Cele, 2019).

Trees can contribute to students' intercultural awareness, as well as to their environmental awareness. Intercultural awareness concerns both specific skills, as well as attitudes and behaviors of students and teachers who demonstrate in the classroom that they can engage positively with cultural diversity in practice (Timoššuk et al., 2022). In every culture, trees and plants have a particularly important place, and there are many myths, stories, and traditions associated with them. In that context, trees can provide many pedagogical opportunities for approaching and reflecting on different cultures. In addition, the great variety of trees that exist in the world and the diversity of trunks, leaves, and fruits and of colors and sizes are a constant stimulus for approaching the beauty that is created by diversity and the richness that emerges through the synthesis of differences.

Motivating children and also adults to observe the variety of trees and plants in the world around them and to appreciate the beauty created by the variety, as well as the harmonious coexistence of differences, also stimulates reflection about human diversity and the richness of multiculturalism. This process can be one of the many ways that can support intercultural awareness, which is the first step in developing respect, acceptance, and the desire to understand and interact with otherness. Besides, as Ramsey (2004) underlines, the relationship between intercultural and environmental awareness is particularly close. She makes reference to the environmental problems linked to the causes of immigration and refugeeism and the need for both children and adults to be aware of those connections.

According to many researchers (Levin, 2003; Nieto, 2004), the development of children's intercultural awareness needs to start as early as possible. Kindergarten, where children can have many opportunities to observe, think, and develop positive attitudes toward otherness, is the right environment for that development (Ferris, 2005). The school garden is often the place that gives children their first opportunities to observe the similarities and differences that exist in the natural environment. Schools with some trees in their yard are the most fortunate in that regard, as these trees can provide various occasions for the development of environmental awareness and intercultural dialogue.

The development of intercultural awareness needs to be continued systematically at all school levels in order to cultivate intercultural competence and empathy, two qualities that are necessary for contemporary citizens and especially teachers (Magos & Simopoulos, 2009; Pigozzi, 2006; Timoššuk et al., 2022).

In order for teachers to develop their students' intercultural competence, they first need to have it themselves. They need to systematically demonstrate in their daily practice that their views and behaviors have all the elements that characterize intercultural competence (Magos & Simopoulos, 2009). Accordingly, teacher education must provide opportunities, including facilitating interactions with people whose ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds are different from the teacher education students', to develop that competence. Such interactions can occur in many different environmental contexts, both urban and natural, including in treescapes.

Here we describe an educational activity aimed at the development of intercultural communication and awareness between teacher education students and refugees of similar ages. The activity was an all-day hike in a forest near Volos, located in central Greece, where both the students and the young refugees live.<sup>1</sup>

### WALKING IN A TREESCAPE

The activity was organized and carried out as part of "Planning, Organization and Evaluation of Intercultural Activities," a course given by the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Thessaly, located in Volos. The purpose of the course is to develop the intercultural competence and empathy of prospective early childhood teachers through their participation in different community events. Ten teacher education students and 10 refugees, all 20 of whom were between 18 and 20 years old, participated in the activity. The refugees, from Pakistan (6), Syria (2), Bangladesh (1), and Iran (1), were from a refugee accommodation center<sup>2</sup> in Volos. All the students were female<sup>3</sup> and all the refugees were male.<sup>4</sup>

The hike in the forest, including stops for discussion and reflection, was planned to take about eight hours. The students and refugees were accompanied by two researchers who recorded the content of the narratives and discussions using field notes.<sup>5</sup> English was the main language of communication between the participants, along with a combination of Greek and English, since about half of the refugees spoke little Greek. There was also an interpreter<sup>6</sup> of Pakistani origin, with knowledge of Urdu, Punjabi, Arabic, English, and Greek to translate where necessary.

During the hike, a series of activities directly related to trees was planned, such as observing the trees along the route and comparing them with those of the participants' places of origin; telling stories and experiences related to trees; and describing myths and traditions associated with trees. Along the way, there were planned stops for discussion and reflection. There were also several short unplanned stops when participants who felt the need to share thoughts, feelings, or memories evoked by particular places along the trail had opportunities for that. The important themes that emerged and were discussed during the hike can be grouped into several categories.

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1 Mount Pelion, a mountain with many forests and particularly rich fauna and flora, is very near Volos.

2 The refugees are unaccompanied young asylum seekers who are waiting for the approval of refugee status. They are hosted in an accommodation center operated by the Greek NGO Arsis.

3 The overwhelming majority of students of the departments of early childhood education in Greece are female.

4 This accommodation center is only for young unaccompanied male asylum seekers. There are accommodation centers for female asylum seekers in other cities in Greece.

5 It was decided from the beginning not to make audio recordings of the narratives and discussions as that could inhibit the free and spontaneous expression of the participants' opinions and feelings. Despite the fact that the excerpts from the participants' narratives presented here come from field notes rather than from an audio recording, every effort was made to render them as accurately as possible. The participants' have granted permission for their narratives to be published.

6 The interpreter was an employee of the NGO hosting the refugees and volunteered to participate in the action. We thank him very much for his help.

## TREES AS HOMELAND

Almost from the start of the hike, both the young refugees and the teacher education students made connections between the natural environment around them and corresponding environments from their places of origin, which gave the participants the opportunity to talk with the rest of the group about those connections (Figure 1). The following are some representative excerpts from those narratives:

I was born in Gujarat.<sup>7</sup> It is a region of Pakistan that also has a large forest there. The trees are very tall and old; they can be a hundred years old. It also has a large river that starts high in the mountains. When there are monsoons, the river fills with water and overflows. Sometimes the water reaches our villages and we have floods. I would love to see my village again, even if it is flooded. (A., a refugee from Pakistan)

We have a large forest of oak trees, very close to the village where I was born. It used to have many trees, but many have been cut down. When the wind passes through the trees, the sound is like a cry. Do trees cry? (M., a teacher education student from Greece)

There were many forests in Syria. Most are on the border with Lebanon. The trees were big, we called them cedars.<sup>8</sup> Their fruits had a beautiful smell. When we burned them in the winter in the fireplace, the house smelled good. The war destroyed all the forests in Syria. Most of the cedars are now dead. I want to remember the trees before the war, green and alive. (S., a refugee from Syria)

I was born on a small Greek island, there are no forests because there is no water. We collect rainwater in tanks. In our garden we have a few trees, among them a lemon tree. It was my favorite tree. Sometimes I dream about it. (P., a teacher education student from Greece)

Those narratives created great interest among all the participants to get to know each other's places of origin better. The group searched for those places on the map using the internet on their mobile phones. They viewed images from their different countries and places of origin, discovering similarities and differences, and commented on what they saw. Also, with the support of the researchers who accompanied them, they discussed issues related to the natural environment in their countries of origin, the dominant tree species there, and the consequences of climate change on the growth of trees and forests.



Figure 1. The path through the trees brought to mind many images from the participants' homelands

7 Gujarat is an area in northeastern Pakistan in the Punjab province. It is a particularly densely populated and poor area. Some of the Gujarati population has emigrated to other countries.

8 These are the cedars of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*). They are trees of particular historical and environmental value and are threatened with extinction.

## TREES AS CHILDHOOD

The contact with the trees along the trail, their scent, and how it felt to touch them brought back strong memories of trees related to their childhood for many of the participants. Describing what they remembered was particularly moving for everyone and appeared to elicit great empathy for the narrators (Figure 2). Among those narratives were these:

We had a pomegranate in our garden. It made big, beautiful, red pomegranates. When I was little, I hung a rope and made a swing. I had also given her a name. I called her Anar. When I started to go to school in the morning, I would say good morning to her. The last time I said good morning to her was when I left home to come to Europe. I haven't seen her since then. (S., a refugee from Iran)

When I was little, my mom would send me to cut lemons from the lemon tree we had in our yard. I felt sorry for the lemons, because I said they are the children of the lemon tree and it is a shame to take them away. So, I always took less lemons to my mom than she needed for the food and my mom sent me back again and again. (P., a teacher education student from Greece)

When I was little in our village, we had many birds in cages. This is common in villages in Pakistan. Every day we took the cages out to a tall tree we had in the village square and listened to the birds chirping. The tree came alive from the chirping of the birds. The tree was talking. It was the bird tree. (V., a refugee from Pakistan)

Almost all the participants, regardless of their place of origin, have retained images and memories of trees from their childhood. This highlights the importance of the influence of trees, and also of the natural world in general, in the lives of children. Several of the participants spoke of a particular favorite tree with which they had developed a special relationship when they were children.



*Figure 2.* Discussing the trees of our childhood

## TREES AS REFUGEES

During the hike, when one of the refugees in the group encountered a tree<sup>9</sup> that is particularly common in Pakistan, but that also has become very common Greece in recent years. He commented, “these trees are like us, they are refugee trees” (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The “refugee tree” (Photo credit: Joseph DiTomaso/Cal-IPC)

The narrator considered the trees of heaven to be “refugee trees” not only because there are so many of them but also because they “take root easily wherever they are; if they find a little soil, they also acquire a homeland.” This statement prompted most of the refugees in the group to talk about their own desire to have a homeland, highlighting the contrast between the instability due to frequent movement that characterizes the refugee experience and the stability of rooted trees. A.’s words echoed those of many of the other refugees. Hugging the trunk of a tree, he said:

One day I want to be like a tree in the forest. To have roots in one place, to not have to move anymore. To stay in one place, to find a job, to have stable friends.

K., one of the teacher education students, asked A. how easy it is to put down roots in a new place, especially one that is so different from his place of origin. Then other members of the student group what they thought it would have been like for them if Greece had been their place of origin. A very interesting dialogue followed regarding both the advantages and the disadvantages of Greece as a place for refugees to settle. The discussion ended with a comparison of trees and refugees:

We are not trees. We don’t just want the soil to live on. We want other things, we want work. We need to make money to send to those who are left behind and expect a lot from us. (S., a refugee from Pakistan)

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<sup>9</sup> This is the tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), originally from China, which has spread to many different countries on six continents. Because it propagates rapidly and easily, it is considered undesirable, which could be viewed as another characteristic it shares with the refugee identity.

## TREES AS CULTURAL BRIDGES

The forest in which the group hiked is considered the homeland of a hero of Greek mythology, the centaur Chiron.<sup>10</sup> Hearing about Chiron from the teacher education students prompted the young refugees to talk about corresponding heroes in the mythologies of their own countries. Thus, one of the refugees, P., spoke about the tiger man, a heroic figure from his own place of origin, Bangladesh. Like Chiron, the tiger man protects his village and the forests that exist around it.

In my village we have a day where we leave gifts for the tiger man. It's like saying thank you for protecting the village and asking him to keep doing it. When we are young children, we are told about him so that we don't stray from our homes and get lost in the forest. The forest is large and has a jungle of wild animals that have attacked the villagers several times.

Members of the group discovered that fairies and elves were also common elements in the folklore of their countries of origin (Figure 4). The following are some representative excerpts from those narratives:

Outside the village there is a place in the forest that we call "enchanted" because it was supposed that in the old days a fairy lived there, and as he approached it stole his voice and he could not speak. Fairies exist in Pakistan, near the sources of rivers. They say that when they get angry, sometimes they open the spring and then the river has a lot of water and the place floods, while other times they close the spring and everything dries up. (A., a refugee from Pakistan)

In Syria and in all Arab countries we have many stories of fairies and jinn. When I was little these stories were my favorites. (S., a refugee from Syria)

In my place, in the woods, there is an old well, and the elders say that there lives a fairy that can transform herself. Sometimes she is like a beautiful woman, other times she is like a snake or a turtle. But when you see her you shouldn't talk because she can bewitch you and turn you into a tree or an animal. (R., a teacher education student from Greece)



Figure 4. This fountain, which we encountered on our hike, prompted a discussion about fairies in the participants' traditions

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10 Chiron, according to Greek mythology, was the son of the god Saturn and the nymph Philyra. He was the teacher of many heroes, most importantly Achilles, the main hero of Homer's *Iliad*. He was considered a sage and a teacher, and also a protector of the forest. He had the head, trunk, and arms of a man, and the body and legs of a horse.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Walking through the forest and having contact with the trees there evoked reflections, images, and feelings connected to the participants' places of origin, childhoods, and elements of their cultural heritage, as well as to the refugee experience. For both the teacher education students and the refugees, contact with trees seemed to create a nostalgia for their place of origin. Sometimes this nostalgia was expressed directly. For example, A., a refugee from Pakistan, said, "I want to see my village again." In other cases, it was expressed indirectly; P., a teacher education student who moved from her place of origin to study at the University of Thessaly, said: "The lemon tree [in the yard of her father's house] was my favorite tree. Sometimes I dream of her."

According to Liu et al. (2015), nostalgia is one of the typical and intense feelings immigrants have; it is also a way of keeping alive the immigrants' relationship with their places of origin. In addition, according to research by Rishbeth and Finney (2006), nostalgia is a common feeling among refugees when they are in green spaces in an urban environment, such as parks in a city. Trees and plants evoke strong images of refugees' countries of origin, accompanied by corresponding thoughts and feelings of nostalgia. In this context, the natural environment of the city can play a positive role in the more rapid integration of refugees into the host country.

In the case of a young refugee of Syrian origin who participated in the forest hike, the feeling of nostalgia is linked to intense feelings of sadness that come from the psychological traumas that the experience of war apparently created. As he stresses, retrieving positive images from before the war is an indirect means of overcoming those painful feelings. "I want to remember the trees before the war, green and alive," he said.

The same nostalgia for the refugees' place of origin can be seen through the images of childhood evoked by the trees around them during the hike. In agreement with Barthes' view (1987) that there is no homeland but childhood, it seems that for the majority of the participants, trees played an important role during their childhood. As most of them were born in villages or small towns, trees were a part of their daily life. Trees were associated with play ("I had hung a rope and made a swing"), with preparing food ("[my mother] sent me to cut lemons [for the dish she was making]") or with having fun ("Every day we took the cages out of a tall tree which we had in the village square and we could hear the birds chirping"). Perhaps because the young refugees were forced to leave their country when they were very young, the childhood images that they recalled during the hike are among the few positive memories they have. The refugee experience was repeatedly revisited by the young refugees during the journey, giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts and comments with the rest of the group.

The place where the teacher education students and the young refugees were together played an important role. The forest, with the variety of stimuli it provided—the richness of the trees, plants, sounds, and scents there—helped the participants to relax, to get in touch with both themselves and others, to interact, and to express their feelings. At the same time, the entire activity was also a cognitive process for the participants, since a great deal of information and knowledge related to general issues of environmental and intercultural awareness was exchanged during the hike.

This cognitive process had all the characteristics of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), where knowledge is acquired through intense experiential and emotional encounters. Accordingly, it has the potential to deeply affect the participants and lead to cognitive and emotional transformations (Mezirow, 2000),<sup>11</sup>

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11 Mezirow talks about transformative learning, that is, learning that can bring about changes in existing mental perspectives and habits. The hike in the forest and the interactions the teacher education students had with the refugees seems to have contributed to the development of transformative learning, which in turn led to the development of the students' intercultural awareness and empathy. Accordingly, those interactions helped the students reflect on the possible stereotypical views that they may have had of the refugees.



including transformations of the stereotypical perceptions that the teacher education students and the refugees may have had of one another. The experiences developed and the feelings shared during the journey were particularly intense and able to influence the previous mental habits of the participants, eliciting empathy. The presence of the trees throughout the hike acted as a catalyst and cultural mediator, providing stimuli and systematically evoking the participants' reflections.

This reflection was particularly important for the teacher education students who, as future teachers, need to have empathy and intercultural competence. The acquisition of these specific skills is a major goal of contemporary education (UNESCO, 2006). Acquiring them needs to start in the preschool years (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). Therefore, the training of preschool teachers needs to include theoretical and experiential approaches that lead to the acquisition of intercultural awareness. The main purpose of the forest hike was to build that awareness among the participating prospective preschool teachers.

It is obvious that the acquisition of intercultural competence cannot happen just by participation in a single intercultural awareness activity; it requires systematic education, both theoretical and practical. An activity designed to promote intercultural interaction, like the forest hike, can be the beginning of changing previously held stereotypical perceptions and attitudes toward otherness and of developing intercultural communication and awareness.

Such a process highlights an image from the end of the hike, where all the refugees and prospective early childhood teachers had come together as a group (Figure 5). Everyone had learned each other's names and some details about their lives. The participants exchanged promises to organize another day-long trip along a different path among the centuries-old trees of the forest—a hike that, in addition to its environmental value, could represent a path of intercultural exchange, solidarity, and empathy.



*Figure 5. Heading home*

Stand still.  
The trees ahead and the bushes beside you  
Are not lost.  
Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you,  
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

—David Wagoner, “Lost”

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