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EXISTING POLICIES FOR THE EDUCATION OF REFUGEES IN GREECE

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ABSTRACT

The present herein work introduces the existing policies for the inclusion of children of immigrant or refugee background in the educational system of Greece. The goal of the Greek educational system is the inclusive education of these categories of students. Consequently, the special characteristics of refugees are studied for this purpose and proposals to strengthen the inclusion policies are presented.

KEYWORDS

Educational policies, Immigrants, Refugees, Inclusive Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, significant demographic, social, economic and cultural changes are taking place both globally and in Greece, due to increased migration and refugee flows. The search for a better life by immigrants and the forced relocation of refugees, due to survival purposes, has formed nowadays' reality, where groups with completely different national, religious and cultural characteristics coexist, mainly in Western World societies. The multiculturalism of Greek society is also reflected in the classroom. According to the European educational policy, all children, regardless of language, religion or origin, should be able to equally participate in education. The Greek state is bound by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. This creates the need not only for the simple coexistence of different cultural elements in the school environment, but also for their interaction with the aim of acquiring knowledge equally by all students (Markou, 2010).

In the present work, the basic principles of inclusive education are mentioned and the special characteristics of the refugee children are presented, which affect their integration into the school system. Then, the existing policies for the inclusion of students are described, and especially for refugee children in Greek schools. Finally, realistic and effective ways to include and co-educate refugee children are proposed, which can be adopted in the educational system of Greece by adopting an intercultural attitude, in order to limit school dropout and failure, with emphasis on the role of school leadership in implementing intercultural principles. Actions are proposed that will strengthen the inclusion of refugee children and the adoption of the principles of intercultural education by Greek schools.

2. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GREECE

The term “inclusive education” was introduced through the UNESCO World Conference on the Education of Children with Disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education aims to eliminate all barriers that make it difficult for all students to participate in learning, regardless of gender, nationality, social background, disability or performance. The inclusion accepts “non-exclusion education” (Zoniou-Sideri, 2004), namely “Education for everybody”, considering that the school institution can meet the specifics and needs of all students, to demonstrate their skills and at the same time to develop relationships, governed by mutual respect (Soulis, 2008). Originally this notion was related merely to “disabled children” (Ainscow, 1998). Inclusive schools do not require students to change, in order to fit the school system, but adapt themselves to meet the needs of all children (Evangelou & Moula, 2016).

In its current form, inclusive education aims to the inclusion of all children, without the aforementioned factors of separation (Stasinos, 2013). After all, there is a direct relationship between inclusive and intercultural education, since the former can include students who fall within the boundaries of intercultural education (Chatzizotiriou & Xenophontos, 2014). Intercultural education is a response to the exclusion of vulnerable social groups, such as refugees, immigrants and Roma. It aims not only at the peaceful coexistence of children of different cultural backgrounds, but also at the meeting, cooperation and effective interaction between cultures (Palaeologou & Evangelou, 2011). Its goal is to promote appropriate educational practices that on the one hand lead to the restriction of stereotypes, prejudices and racism towards any form of diversity and create attitudes of acceptance and respect, and on the other hand provide equal educational opportunities for all (Evangelou & Moula, 2016). The acceptance of all students, regardless of differences in abilities, needs, gender, social or cultural background, and their reconciliation are the goals of the inclusive school, where any form of heterogeneity is perceived not as a problem but as an enrichment of the learning process.

2.1. Refugee children: Special characteristics

Since 2015, Greece has become a transit point for thousands of refugees to Europe, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. These people, having experienced war, torture and abuse, are looking for a better life in a European country. However, after the closure of the border in March 2016, thousands of refugees were trapped in Greece (Oxfam, 2016). Thus, Greece was transformed into a country of refugee settlement and hosting centres were set up to cope with problems of housing, food, medical care and refugees’ education. According to the evaluation report of the project for the “Inclusion of Refugee Children in Education” (MERR, 2017), it is estimated that more than

20,000 minors-refugees lived in Greece, in 2017. The same percentage has been confirmed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNICEF, which estimates that the number of refugee children in Greece is 20,300, while according to official data from the Hellenic Republic, the number of unaccompanied children remains increased.

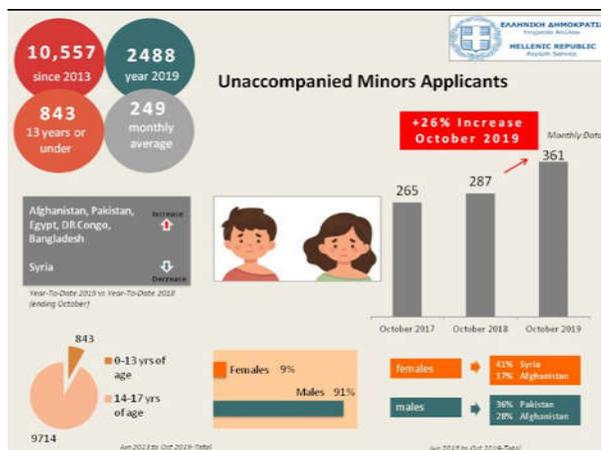


Figure 1. Number of unaccompanied children (Source: <http://asylo.gov.gr>).

Refugee children have the following educational, language and other needs:

1. The existence of safety, and the reduction of xenophobia and racism, adopted by their classmates, as a reflection of what is happening in society, leading to social exclusion. In this respect, schools can play a key role. The existence of an encouraging and supportive environment makes children feel safe and accepted, will give them the opportunity to pursue their success and will contribute to their smooth integration into the school environment (Van der Veer, 2000).
2. The timely and successful diagnosis of the level of knowledge of the language, of the host institution. The diagnosis of these needs is not easy, but it is imperative so that they can be noted, recorded, prioritized and satisfied. It can be done with the use of weighted tests, proposed by the Hellenic Institute of Educational Policy, or with exercises that the teachers themselves can prepare. It is worth noting that it is proposed to take into account criteria, which have been defined internationally, and interesting tools that have been developed, related to language proficiency, such as the ESL Scales of the USA, ESL Bandscales of Australia and others. The conclusions should not be drawn arbitrarily, but after some thought and gathering of sufficient information. Diagnosis is a prerequisite for designing effective and differentiated teaching.
3. Empowerment; refugees have experienced difficult situations, because war, the violent abandonment of their home, the loss of their family members and friends, and their abuse can cause them psychological distress. At the same time, their uprooting and the journey they make cause stress and intensifies their bad psychological state. Focusing mainly on children, research has shown that they are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, physical reflection of emotions, traumatic stress, and behavioural problems (Betancourt et al., 2012). In order to overcome their traumatic experiences, they need psychological and social support, safe conditions and access to vital

spaces, access to agencies and services, in accordance with respect for human rights. Finally, some refugee children have not attended school in their country of origin, and support is needed to understand the purpose and function of the school they will attend.

2.2. Policies for inclusive education in Greece

In the particularly difficult conditions of the refugee crisis and for meeting the aforementioned needs of children with refugee background, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religions, for the teaching of children of immigrant or refugee background, emphasized the establishment and operation of Reception Agencies for the Education of Refugees (RAER), Reception Classes, Tutoring Classes and Schools of Intercultural Education. The last two institutions existed before 1980 and 1982 respectively, and concerned children of Greeks who returned from other countries, where they had emigrated mainly for financial reasons. After 1999, the children of refugees and immigrants have the right to study in the Reception and Tutoring Classes, in addition to the children of returnees.

In particular, for each of the above institutions, the following are provided:

1. In the Schools of Intercultural Education, the intensive learning of the Modern Greek language is provided, but also the co-teaching in the same class of Greeks and students with different cultural characteristics. According to the current legislation, these schools have the possibility to deviate from the standard curriculum, in order to cover the needs of their pupils and to include in their curriculum cultural elements that refer to the particular cultural background of their migrant pupils.
2. The Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) include schools of primary and secondary education that operate in areas where there is a large school dropout and socio-economic problems. Their goal is to prepare pupils, who do not know the Greek language, to join the regular classes later, through “participatory, active and effective” teaching. Regarding the special case of refugee children, the institutional scheme of the Reception Classes, mentioned above, responds only in the case of those children who are settled in the urban areas and aim to gradually join the regular classes of the Greek school. Yet, few of these children live in an apartment with their families. Most refugees remain in shelters and the main issue for them is to relocate to another country. The Reception Classes are divided into two types:
 - a. In Reception Classes I, where pupils, who know little or no Greek, attend. In these Classes, a program is applied for learning Greek as a second language, outside the normal classes. The study lasts a teaching year with the possibility of extension.
 - b. In Reception Classes II, where pupils, who have moderate knowledge of the Greek language, attend, which is an obstacle to attending classes in the regular classroom. For this, they are provided with help, through parallel teaching, in the Greek language course or in other courses, either in the regular classroom or outside it. The study can last up to three teaching years.

For the additional educational support of the pupils of immigrant origin, who have difficulties with the Greek language in the regular classroom, the supportive Tutoring Classes operate. These classes operate after the end of regular school hours, for up to 8-10

teaching hours per week. The number of required pupils for the establishment of a Tutoring Classes ranges from 3 to 8.

3. The RAERs are attended by refugee children, who, after the violent removal from their country, have been out of schooling for more than a year. Therefore, the goal of RAER is the smooth transition of children from the life to camps to a school normality, and ultimately to their successful reintegration into school culture. Children acquire assets for their educational and social integration, whether they remain in Greece or settle in another country. In this context, a 20-hour weekly educational program is implemented in RAERs that includes the teaching of Greek language, mathematics, English and informatics, as well as sports and artistic activities. The RAERs operate either within the accommodation centres or within the nearest schools, according to the afternoon schedule. The minimum number of pupils, for which a RAER of a single class can be created, is set at 10 persons and the maximum at 20. More classes may operate in each RAER, depending on the number of refugee children.

In each refugee accommodation centre, a Refugee Education Coordinator (REC) is appointed to facilitate the access of refugee children to the Greek educational system and their attendance at the Reception Classes or the RAER. He/she is a state teacher with qualifications in intercultural education, such as studies, work experience in teaching Greek as a foreign language or volunteer work with refugees. The mission of a REC is to map the refugee families living in the accommodation centres, to inform them about the possibility of their children to attend the Greek school; he/she also facilitates their vaccination and movement to and from school, but also cooperates harmoniously with the teachers and the Principal of the school.

The operation of RAERs, ZEPs and Reception Classes, despite all the weaknesses that have been pointed out, ensures that the refugee children can attend school. It successfully implements educational equality in practice and highlights the acceptance of the equality of cultures. The large number and special characteristics of the refugee children, as well as the phenomenon of population flow, make the work of teachers, who teach refugee children, particularly demanding.

2.3. Proposals to strengthen inclusion

Initially, the need to train teachers and those who serve in RAER and Reception Classes is imperative. Unfortunately, Greek teachers do not have intercultural readiness (Papachristos, 2011). This is because training resources are minimal, but also because Principals are dissatisfied with the voids created in the program, when teachers who serve in education attend seminars, as well as because teachers themselves are dissatisfied, when they are forced to extend their workhours to the detriment of their family obligations. The continuous training of teachers is considered necessary, in matters of intercultural education, teaching Greek as a second language, cultural identity and evaluation of foreign language pupils (Rentzi, 2017). In addition, school principals could suggest to the relevant Regional Centre for Educational Planning the implementation of intercultural education training programs or even organize them in the school itself, in the context of in-school education, encouraging teachers to attend them.

It is also necessary to implement awareness programs for indigenous pupils, in order to create friendships and work harmoniously with refugee children, which is a necessary condition for the admission and stay of refugee children in the educational process. In addition, it is necessary to

review and enrich the curricula and textbooks with data and positive activities that enhance intercultural communication and acquaintance of pupils of different cultural backgrounds (Papachristos, 2011). Some steps towards enhancing the school success of immigrant pupils would be: teaching the mother tongue and culture of the countries of origin, teaching by bilingual teachers and systematic learning of the Greek language (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015; Foulidi et al., 2019).

At the same time, the redefinition of the framework for cooperation between the school and the foreign family is necessary. The parents' interest in educating their children helps them improve their language skills, improve their school behaviour, and exhibit good school performance for a long time. It is therefore imperative that teachers create connections with parents, listen to their needs and, through an empowerment process, give them an understanding of the need for their children to stay in school and work with them (Chatzidaki, 2006). The collaboration with families and the contact with their perceptions and cultural heritage help in understanding the philosophy and practices of families and communities, so that the school can integrate them into its institutions (Chatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018). It has also been shown that parental involvement in school activities has not only led to better school performance of pupils with different cultural characteristics, but has also facilitated their socialization (Intxausti & Etxeberria, 2013). The parental involvement has positive effects on teachers as well, because their work is facilitated. Parents gather the necessary information for them to understand the behaviour of their pupils and to understand their needs more effectively, in order to achieve the teaching goals (Mylonakou-Keke, 2009).

The school leaders are responsible for building networks of cooperation with other schools that have a similar composition of population, but also with schools that have similar socio-cultural characteristics. Schools that have common characteristics, regarding the origin of the pupils' population, the socio-economic level and the educational capital of their families, face similar challenges and have to meet common needs. Undoubtedly, the role of school leaders in intercultural education is crucial. However, the way in which school principals perceive pluralism and parity also forms their attitude towards intercultural education. The intercultural leaders need to focus on equality rather than difference, empowering marginalized pupils by promoting social justice and equality. The aim of the cooperation networks is to improve intercultural education through the inclusive path (Chatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018).

In order to strengthen inclusion, it is proposed that the principles of intercultural education should be adopted in the school culture. School leaders can promote team spirit in working teachers, as well as their participation in decision-making. A school leader must encourage teamwork throughout the educational community and also encourage teachers to be educated on intercultural issues. Intercultural leaders promote social justice and equality, through a change in attitude, applied pedagogy, and school curricula. Thus, by focusing on pluralism and marginalizing cultural deficits, they strengthen marginalized pupils (Chatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018). In addition, the intercultural leadership needs to encourage teamwork, not only within the school leadership team, but also throughout the educational community. The school leader must be supportive, take initiatives, at sometimes guide and at other times encourage staff to respond to challenges (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Finally, it is necessary to inform and sensitize the native parents, in collaboration with the parents' and guardians' associations. Thus, the belief in the enrichment dimension of variety and difference is cultivated, while importance will be given to the protection of human dignity and human rights (Angelides et al., 2010). Teachers should encourage the communication of pupils of all nationalities and create a pleasant learning context, in which every child, depending on his/her cultural and educational background, will be able to develop his/her interests, inclinations and skills (Rentzi, 2017).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In Greece, the Ministry of Education and Religions has adopted intercultural practices and ensured the operation of the Schools of Intercultural Education, Reception Classes, Tutoring Classes and RAERs. These ensured the attendance of refugee pupils at the Greek school. Teachers need to be more supported, in order to meet the needs and characteristics of all pupils and, in addition, to achieve the acceptance of diversity (Chatzistiriou & Xenophontos, 2014). The aim of inclusive education, after all, is to overcome the obstacles that make it difficult for all pupils to participate in education and learn regardless of gender, nationality, social background, performance or disability (Florin et al., 2010). Additional support measures are needed for both school principals and teachers. The acceptance of diversity in the classroom, the adoption of the values of intercultural education, but also the parental involvement in school events limits the stereotypes and creates appropriate conditions for a school for everybody (Angelidis, 2011).

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